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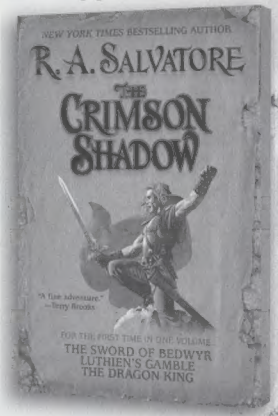

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CARL A. GNAM, JR.
Editorial Director

SHAWNA MCCARTHY
Editor

LAURA CLEVELAND
Managing Editor

SAMANTHA DeTULLEO
Art Director

DOUGLAS COHEN
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Contributors:
Eric T. Baker, Leah Bobet, Christine Colby, Jon Hansen, M.K. Hobson, Sandra McDonald, Resa Nelson, Thomas Seay, Michelle Thuma, Carrie Vaughn, Gahan Wilson, Paul Witcover

MARK HINTZ
Chief Executive Officer

DIANE BONIFANTI
Business Manager

TINA POUST
Comptroller

KATHY PAULHAMUS
MARY NOLAN
SANDRA HILLYARD
Subscription Customer Service

Curtis Circulation Company
Worldwide Distribution

Advertising Offices:
JEFF KIGHT
Advertising Director
(570) 322-7848, Ext. 117

453 Carlisle Drive,
Herndon, VA 20170
703-964-0361 / FAX: 703-964-0366

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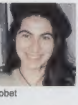
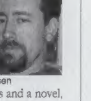


Bobet

LEAH BOBET lives in Toronto, where she studies linguistics and works in Canada's oldest science fiction bookstore. Her work has appeared recently in *The Year's Best Science Fiction* and *Fantasy for Teens*, and is upcoming in *On Spec* and *Strange Horizons*.



Hansen

JON HANSEN is a writer, librarian, and occasional blood donor. His work has appeared in a number of venues, including *Strange Horizons*, *Weird Tales*, and *Lenox Avenue*. He and his wife Lisa live in the exurban Atlanta sprawl. His chief amusement when not writing is watching the cats stalk the birdfeeder.

Vaughn

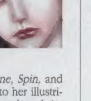
CARRIE VAUGHN has published about twenty short stories and a novel, *Kitty and The Midnight Hour*. Her second novel, *Kitty Goes to Washington*, was published July 2006. She lives in Boulder, Colorado, with her dog and too many hobbies. Visit her at *www.carrievaughn.com*.

MICHELLE THUMA is a speculative fiction writer. Prior publication credits include sales to *Speculon* and *Story House*, among others. Visit her online at *www.michellethuma.com*.

Windling

M.K. HOBSON's stories have appeared in many fine publications and anthologies, including *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *SCI FICTION*, *Strange Horizons*, and *Polyphony 5*. She maintains a blog (*bricoleur.livejournal.com*), a website (*www.demimonde.com*), and a family (husband, daughter, and two grumpy cats).

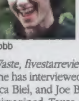
TERRI WINDLING originated, edits, and occasionally still writes for *Realms of Fantasy*'s Folkroots column. She has won seven World Fantasy Awards, the Bram Stoker Award, and received the Mythopoeic Award for her novel *The Wood Wife*. Previous Folkroots columns can be found on her website: *www.endicott-studio.com*.



Park

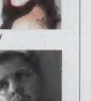
HYEJEONG PARK, a School of Visual Arts graduate, works freelance in New York City. She loves sunny days, because you can see the shadows more clearly. Her work comes from those shadows, as without light there would be no darkness. Visit her website at *http://hyegallery.com*.

ZELA LOBB is a Canadian illustrator whose work has been garnering international acclaim and interest from premier publications like *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *Forbes*, to books and newspapers across the globe. Prior to her illustrious illustration career, Zela spent seven years working on murals and signage. Additionally, she has created illustrations for numerous snowboards, packaging, and clothing designs. More of her work can be seen on her website, *www.zelazela.com*.



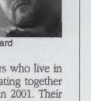
Lobb

CHRISTINE COLBY has lived in New York City just long enough to consider herself a New Yorker. She is the copy chief of *Allure* magazine. Also a freelance writer, she has been published in *NY Waste*, *fivestarreviews.com*, and *Fangoria* magazine. For *Fangoria*, Christine has interviewed celebrities such as Bruce Campbell, R. Lee Ermey, Jessica Biel, and Joe Bob Briggs. She visited the set during the filming of the reimagined *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and hasn't been the same since. She is also a belly dancer, enjoying New York's thriving alternative belly dance scene. This is her first piece for *Realms of Fantasy*.



Colby

DAVID LEONARD's illustration has been called timeless by many art directors. This Lancaster, Pennsylvania, native, has given in to the enchanting charms of Illustration. His bold, yet soft trace embodies strong concepts and a wit worth stopping for. His illustrations have lent a twist to many clients from corporate America to children's books to small businesses. Today David lives between New York City, Scranton, PA, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with his wife, Anna, showcasing their talents. To view more of David's work please visit *www.davidleonard.com* and *www.hybridstudios. com*.



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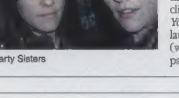

Carty Sisters

ERIN AND KELLY CARTY are twin sisters who live in Toronto, Canada. They have been illustrating together since graduating from Sheridan College in 2001. Their client list includes Limited and Lamar Snowboards, *New York* magazine, *Scholastic*, and many others. After the launch of their own artist-designed vinyl toy "Twink" (*www.twinkktoy. com*), they have been busy working on paintings for their own gallery show this November.

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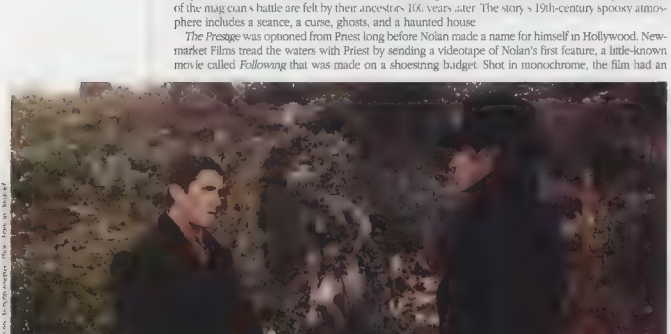
By Resa Nelson

Hugh Jackman takes the lead in two of this fall's most fascinating fantasy movies.

One of this fall's most anticipated films is *The Prestige*, scheduled for release on October 27 from Touchstone Pictures. Directed by Christopher Nolan (*Batman Begins*, *Memento*), the movie is based on Christopher Priest's novel, winner of the 1996 World Fantasy Award. Set in the Victorian era, *The Prestige* is about two young stage illusionists who perform in music halls. Rupert Angier (played by Hugh Jackman of the *X-Men* movies, *Van Helsing*) is an aristocrat, while Alfred Borden (played by Christian Bale of *Batman Begins*, *American Psycho*) comes from working-class roots. After a run-in at a fake seance, these magicians become obsessed with sabotaging each other, which leads to a lifelong feud. When Rupert and Alfred independently come up with a mind-blowing trick, each is desperate to learn the other's secret, even if discovering that secret involves murder. The repercussions of the magicians' battle are felt by their ancestors 100 years later. The story's 19th-century spooky atmosphere includes a seance, a curse, ghosts, and a haunted house.

The Prestige was optioned from Priest long before Nolan made a name for himself in Hollywood. Newmarket Films tread the waters with Priest by sending a videotape of Nolan's first feature, a little-known movie called *Following* that was made on a shoestring budget. Shot in monochrome, the film had an eerie quality that appealed to Priest and reminded him of his own work. He'd received several offers from other studios but chose the then-unknown Nolan because Priest liked the director's style.



Magicians Alfred Borden (Christian Bale) and Rupert Angier (Hugh Jackman) are obsessed with sabotaging each other in The Prestige

Jonathan Nolan (Christopher Nolan's brother) wrote the screenplay, which Priest read before filming began. On his website, Priest says, "I can safely say that it is an extraordinary and brilliant script. I have no hesitation in predicting *The Prestige* will be his finest movie since *Memento*. I hope that whets the appetite of Mr. Nolan's many admirers, as it whets mine!"

Scarlett Johanssen (*Scoop*, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*), Michael Caine (*Bewitched*, *Batman Begins*), David Bowie (*The Man Who Fell to Earth*, *Labyrinth*), and Andy Serkis (the *Lord of the Rings* movies, *King Kong*) also star.

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M RP 17+ Visit www.esrb.org for updated rating information.

PlayStation.2

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This fall's other major fantasy film is *The Fountain*, a Warner Brothers film due for release on November 22. Written and directed by Darren Aronofsky (*Pi*, *Requiem for a Dream*), the story takes place over the course of a thousand years during which the same man (in different incarnations) tries to save the woman he loves. When Aronofsky first tried to bring his story to the big screen, the deal fell through. He then turned *The Fountain* into a graphic novel in which three similar stories intertwine.

The story begins in 16th-century Spain with conquistador Tomas Creo (played by Hugh Jackman), who is in love with Queen Isabel (played by Rachel Weisz of *The Mummy*). Once the Spaniards arrive in Central America, Captain Creo leads the Spanish army through lush jungles and Mayan temples. To save his queen's life, Creo must find the Tree of Life. Believing it's more than a myth, Creo's determined to mine the precious sap from the tree. Anyone who drinks the sap will gain eternal life.

In the present day, Tommy Creo (Jackman) is a scientist whose wife Isabel (Weisz) is dying of cancer. Creo races to find a cure before she dies. In the 26th century, Tom Creo (Jackman) is an astronaut who explores other planets instead of continents. This time, he's trying to save the life of a tree that represents his dead wife.

Reported to be a story rooted in spirituality, anyone familiar with Spanish will recognize that the main character's last name means "I believe." ❧

In The Fountain, *Thomas Creo (Hugh Jackman) leads the 16th-century Spanish army in search of the tree of life and seeks a cure for his wife.*

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THREE MUST-SEE FANTASY TV SHOWS
If You Missed Them, Look for Reruns or DVDs

In December 2 K's *The Librarian: Quest for the Spear* debuted on TNT and earned smash ratings. From its inception, *The Librarian* was intended to be a series of TV movies with the look and feel of high-budget blockbusters. The second movie in this series,

Flynn (Jewel Staite) and Noah Wyle) and Emily Davenport (Gabrielle Anwar) search for the map to King Solomon's Mines.

The Librarian 2: Return to King Solomon's Mines, is set to debut on December 3

A few years ago, creator David Titcher came up with the idea for this series. He was inspired by the scene at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* when the ark was stored in a warehouse. Titcher imagined a warehouse storing all the legendary items from history and mythology. He decided to put it underneath the fictional Metropolitan Library. Furthermore, he thought the guardian of these priceless treasures should be a librarian. In *Quest for the Spear*, Noah Wyle (TV's *ER*) played Flynn Carsen, a professional student who balks at the idea of growing up. In a mysterious turn of events, he's hired as a librarian, only to be forced kicking and screaming into the adventure of retrieving a valuable artifact stolen from the library.

"Originally, I conceived it as a big-budget film," Titcher says about the first movie. He wrote: "I went to Dean Devlin [*Stargate*, *Independence Day*], who's the executive producer. He said, 'Let's take this opportunity to go to TNT. If they're interested, we'll have a much better chance of getting it made.'

"When you go in for your meeting, you usually get, 'We know we said we liked the pitch, but now here's how we want you to do it completely differently.' And they said, 'We want you to do exactly what you said.'"

Then came a watershed moment when a change in technology turned the television industry on its ear. Computer-generated effects that had previously cost millions suddenly became very affordable. As a result, Devlin realized *The Librarian* movie series could have the same CGI effects as any top-notch feature film playing in the cineplex. In other words, he could blaze a new trail by creating a TV movie equal in size and scope to a feature film.

Wyle returns as Flynn in *The Librarian 2: Return to King Solomon's Mines*, which begins with his pursuit of the Crystal Skull, an artifact from the lost city of Atlantis. After Flynn brings the skull to the safety of the library, [illegible] mother, played by [illegible], a Dickakis of [illegible] and Steve [illegible] plans an [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

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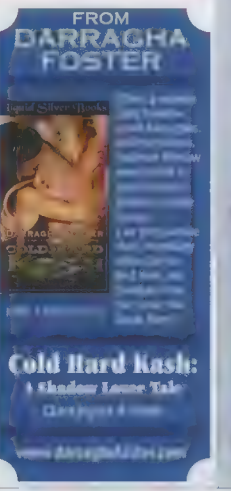

feels like she doesn't fit in and will do whatever it takes to be accepted by the popular kids. Her roommate Thelma (played by Jemima Rooper) is Cassie's polar opposite. Thelma is so comfortable in her own skin that she's open about being a lesbian. They become best friends, even though Thelma falls in love with Cassie, knowing it's destined to be unrequited. When Cassie accidentally unearths an ancient artifact in one of the school's old buildings, she's soon bewitched by strange visions and new found magical powers. This attracts the attention of Azazeal (played by Michael Fassbender of *Band of Brothers*), a fallen angel whose actions lead to Thelma's death. As a ghost, Thelma stays by Cassie's side to help in whatever way she can while Azazeal hatches his master plan.

"I hope that *Hex* will go down really well in the States," Rooper says on the BBC America website. "I think it's a genre of program that is more widely recognized in the States. It was quite a pioneering thing for the UK to do. It had never been done before over here with the kind of budgets that American shows get. And yet I think it's really different from *Buffy* or *Angel* or any of the other equivalent shows the U.S. has made simply because it's set in England. We've got the history and the mythology that we can base our program on, which America doesn't have, and gives it a good grounding and a good rooting in real history which sets it apart. Also, I hope the Americans will like the novelty of seeing the British kids who are quite glamorous at their boarding school in the countryside."

Cole adds: "I think if it's anything as successful as *Buffy* that would be wonderful. I think initially we didn't set out to make it like *Buffy*, and we weren't quite sure whether we were going to make it as sci-fi as *Buffy*, or whether it was going to be more like teen-age drama about these two young girls. I think it does have very strong elements of both, and in

BBC America's Hex *takes place in a girls boarding school in modern-day England.*

Sam Tyler (John Simm) seems to have time-traveled back to 1973 in Life on Mars. *He has no idea how he got there or how to return to his life in 2006.*

The Librarian *2 is full of Indiana Jones-style action scenes*

the second season, we've moved more towards a sci-fi drama, with a darker element."

The final season of *Hex* is scheduled to debut on BBC America in summer 2007.

Life on Mars is a time travel police drama that takes its name from a David Bowie song. The series begins when British detective Sam Tyler (played by John Simm) is accidentally hit by a car while on the hunt for a serial killer. He regains consciousness in the year 1973 and discovers he's expected to show up for work at a police station to which he's been transferred. Sam discovers he still has a bizarre link to the future from which he comes. Sometimes people from his world seem to speak to him through people he meets in the past. Other times he has disturbing nightmares. In the premiere episode, Sam learns that his girlfriend has been captured by the serial killer he was pursuing. To save her life, Sam tracks down and arrests the same serial killer in 1973.

But Sam is still stuck in the past. His no-nonsense boss, Gene "Guv" Hunt (played by Philip Glenister) points out that it was Sam who asked to be transferred, implying that it's Sam's choice to live in the past—at least, for now. Eerily, Guv and other characters might or might not be mouthpieces advising Sam that he traveled back to the past for a reason, and he alone must discover what that reason is and what he must do before returning to life as he knows it. In the meantime, the oddities of the past—including nonchalant police brutality and lack of technology—are so alien to Sam that he might as well be living on Mars. He can't help but wonder if he's in a coma and dreaming, if he's gone crazy, or if he really is living in 1973.

On the BBC America website, Simm says about his character, "When you first see him in 2006, he isn't particularly likable. He's quite pedantic and anal, and he doesn't seem to have much of a sense of humor. When he wakes up in the 1970s, it's quite a shock to him. For Sam, it's an absolute nightmare—it's like some crazy mad dream he's having and he just can't wake up."

And yet, Sam strikes up a surprising friendship with his new boss. "They learn to work together even though they are completely different. Gene's the boss and they have all learned from him, but Sam's methods influence the rest of CID [Criminal Investigation Department]. Sam has the knowledge of how things are going to turn out and he knows about things like multitasking and taping interviews and they do it and they take it on board. His knowledge of the future is his only weapon and the only thing he can work with. And it's quite hard for Gene to take on board because he just thinks Sam's a nutter! But Sam learns from Gene too—a little humanity and using his gut instinct. It's a perfect 'buddy buddy' cop thing but with a really weird twist to it."

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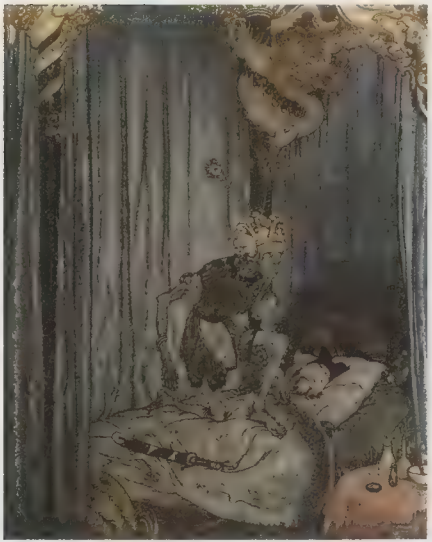
By Terri Windling

Death is personified in the Grimms' "Godfather Death" and other tales.

Once upon a time there was a poor tailor who could barely feed his twelve children. When the thirteenth was born, the distraught man ran out to the nearby road determined to find someone to stand as godfather to the child. He knew of no other way that he could provide for his newborn son. The first person to pass was God, but the poor tailor rejected him. "God gives to the rich and takes from the poor. I'll wait for another to come." The second to pass was the Devil, but the poor tailor rejected him too. "He lies and cheats and leads good men astray. I'll wait for another." The third man to pass was Death, and the poor tailor considered him carefully. "Death treats all men alike whether rich or poor. He's the one I'll ask."



Death squats on the Emperor's chest in Edmund Dulac's illustration for "The Nightingale," by Hans Christian Andersen

Now Death had never been asked such a thing before, but he agreed at once. "Your child shall lack for nothing," he said, "for I am a powerful friend indeed." The year went by and he kept his word. The boy and his family lacked for nothing. When the boy finally came of age, his Godfather Death appeared before him. "It is time to establish you in the world. You are to become a great physician. Take this magical herb, the cure for any malady of this earth. Look for me when you're called to a patient's bed. If you see me at its head then give them a tincture of the herb and then your patient will be well. But if you see me at the foot, you'll know it is their time to die. Your diagnosis will always be right, and you will be famous around the world."

And so it was. The young man became the most famous doctor of his time, and his fame spread far and wide until it reached the ears of the king. The king lay sick in his golden bed and he summoned the tailor's son to him. But when the young doctor arrived at last in the richly appointed bedchamber, he saw that the king was gravely ill and that Death stood at his feet. Now this king was much beloved and the young man wanted very much to cure him. He quickly instructed the court attendants to turn the bed the opposite way, and he then restored the king to health with a tincture of the magical herb. Death was not pleased. He shook his long, bony finger at his godson and said, "You must never cheat me again. If you do, it will be the worse for you."

The young man took this warning to heart and did not cross his Godfather Death again—until the king's daughter fell ill and he was summoned back to the palace. This was the good king's only child. He was desperate to see her well. "Save her life," said the king, "and I shall give you her hand in marriage." The doctor went to the princess's bedchamber where Death was waiting. He stood at the foot...if the princess's bed were ready to take her away. Don't cross me again," his godfather warned, but the doctor was half in love already. He ordered the princess's bed to be turned, and gave her the herbal tincture.

Entreri vs Jarlaxle
IT'S THE LAST MARK THAT MATTERS

The princess was healed immediately, but Death reached out a bony hand and clamped it on his godson's arm, saying "*You'll* go with me instead." He took the young man into a cave, its wall niches covered with millions of candles. "Here," he said, "are candles burning for every life upon the earth. Each time a candle grows low and snuffs out, a life is ended. This one is yours." Death pointed to a candle that had burned down to a pool of wax.

Please," his godson begged, "for many years I was your faithful servant. Please, Godfather Death, won't you light a new candle for me?" Death gazed at him remorselessly. The candle sputtered and flickered out. The young doctor fell down dead.

This story, titled "Godfather Death," comes from the famous German folk tale collection of the Brothers Grimm. It can also be found in variant forms in a number of other countries as well—such as "The Shepard and the Three Deases" from Greece, "The Just Man" from Italy, "The Soul-Taking Angel" from America, "The Contract with Azrael" from Egypt, "Dr Urssenbeck" from Austria, "The Boy with the Keg of Ale" from Norway. It's one of a number of folk and fairy tales in which Death is personified: sometimes as a frightening figure, sometimes as a compassionate one, and sometimes as a matter-of-fact man or woman who simply has a job to do.

There are many tales in which Death is outwitted, such as "Jump into My Sack" from Slovenia—in which a young man pleases a powerful fairy who offers him two magic wishes. He asks for a sack that will suck in whatever he names, and a stick that will do all he asks. These wishes are granted, and the young man uses the sack to bring him meat and drink until he comes to a great city and falls in with a group of gamblers. Death (or the Devil, in an Italian version of the tale) is among the gamblers in disguise, amusing himself at the gaming table by luring men to financial ruin and then collecting their souls when they are driven to suicide. The young man sees through Death's disguise. He orders the sack to suck Death up, then commands the stick to beat him soundly. At length Death begs for mercy, promising the young man whatever he wants. The young man asks for the restoration to life of all his gambling friends and then orders Death to leave at once and to stay far away from him. But many years later, old and ill, he has second thoughts about this bargain. He now uses the sack to call Death back, and is grateful to be led away.

In a number of tales Death is outwitted and banished with dire consequences. The old, the ill, and the fatally wounded do not die, but linger in agony until finally the importance of Death's role can no longer be ignored. In a Spanish tale, an old woman traps Death in the pear tree and will not let him go until he promises to never come back. The woman's name is Tia Miseria (Aunt Misery), and as long as Death keeps his promise to her we'll have misery in the world. In a similar tale from Portugal, Death outwits the old woman in the end, but finds her so shrewish, he promptly brings her back to her house and flees.

Some tales feature a Godmother Death, such as version of the stories told in Slovenia and Moravia, and across the sea in the Appalachian region of West Virginia. The depiction of Death as male or female depended on the culture, the times, and the individual storyteller, but examples of both are widely found in folk tales the world over. In "Death and the Maiden," a story known in both folk tale and folk ballad form, the interaction of a male Death figure and the well-born young woman he's come to claim has an almost seductive quality. She tries to bargain for life, offering up her gold and jewels, as he gently explains that she must go with him that very night. In some pictorial representations of the story, Death is portrayed as a handsome knight in black, in others, more frighteningly, he is a skeleton in knightly clothes (Franz Schubert drew on this tale for lovely *Quartet in D Minor Death and the Maiden*.) In a Turkish fairy tale, "The Prince Who Longed for Immortality," a male Death figure is pitted against the Queen of Immortality. They wager over who will get the hero by throwing him up in the air. In a story from northern Italy, Death is portrayed as a lovely young woman. She's an unwelcome guest in the palace when her true identity is revealed as she takes the handsome young king away—but a welcome guest in the cottage of a poor, old woman who's been waiting for her.

Hans Holbein the Younger created 41 woodcuts for The Dance of Death, *published in 1538. Here The Knight is impaled in a dance with Death "Even in a moment shall they die,/At midnight shall men quake with fear,/The might, shall not be pass'd by,/Nor know who thrusts the fatal spear*

In early medieval representations, Death was usually masculine, powerful, pitiless, omni-present. Clad in black, he was the Grim Reaper who cut men and women down in their prime, prince and poet and pauper alike in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, we find more examples of Death as woman—such as Donna La Morte in Petrarch's famous poem "The Triumph of Death," who appears suddenly all "black, and in black" to claim the life of a young noblewoman. The "Dance of Death" (or "Danse Macabre") first appeared in the middle of the 14th century as the Black Death swept across Europe. The Dance of Death originated in the form of a Christian spectacular play, usually performed in churchyards and cemeteries among the graves. Death would appear as masked, skeletal figures intent on leading away a series of victims (twenty four in number) from all classes of society. The victims would protest, offering reasons why they and they alone should be spared, but in the end all are danced off to the grave while the fiddlers play. This was paired with sermons stressing that death could strike anyone at any moment, exhorting the audience to prepare themselves and live free of sin.

In Italy in the following century, Triumph of Death spectacles were more elaborately staged. Charles B. Herbermann and George Charles Williams describe them (in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*): "After dark a huge wagon, draped in black and drawn by oxen, drove through the streets of the city. At the end of the shaft was seen the Angel of Death blowing the trumpet. On the top of the wagon stood a great figure of Death carrying a scythe and surrounded by coffins. Around the wagons were covered graves which opened whenever the procession halted. Men dressed in black garments on which were painted skulls and bones came forth and, seated on the edge of the graves, sang dirges on the shortness of human life. Before and behind the wagon appeared men in black and white bearing torches and death masks, followed by

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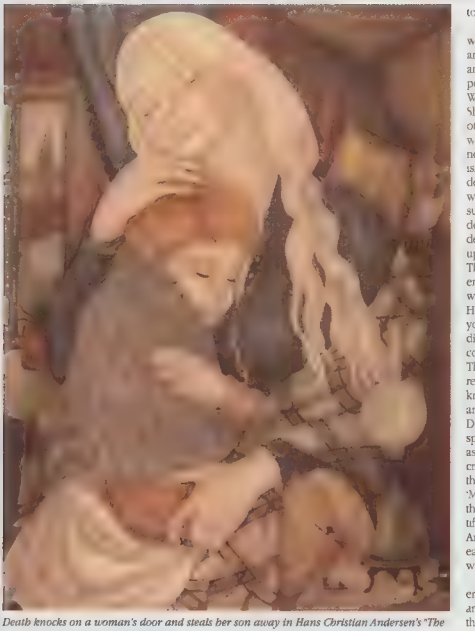

Death knocks on a woman's door and steals her son away in Hans Christian Andersen's "The Story of a Mother" This illustration was done for the French edition by Adrienne Segur.

banners displaying skulls and bones and skeletons riding on scrawny nags While they marched the entire company sang the Miserere with trembling voices."

There are many pictorial representations of the Dance of Death, such as those created by Hans Holbein in 1538 Holbein begins with the Creation, Temptation, Expulsion, and Consequences of the sin of Adam and Eve, which is what brought Death into the world The fifth woodcut depicts the dead as skeletons in a cemetery cavorting with musical instruments The following images show various figures being danced away, from a Pope to an Emperor to a Beggar The final images show the Last Judgment and the triumph of God over Death

Death also appears as a skeleton on the earliest extant Tarot cards, which first appeared in Italy and France in the 14th century During the 15th century, use of the cards was limited because each deck had to be hand drawn and painted, by the 16th century, developing printing techniques allowed Tarot use to be more widespread In the Marseille deck from this period, Death is a genderless, skeletal figure holding a scythe and standing on a field of bones The better-known Rider Waite Tarot deck dates back only to 1910, but draws on symbolic imagery from an earlier period Here, Death appears as a skeletal knight, dressed in black armor, upon a white horse Arthur Edward Waite created this card using imagery drawn from Holbein's art, and from a 16th-century Durer engraving depicting a knight on a horse with his back to the Devil.

Midori Snyder is a contemporary writer who has worked with the folklore of death in a variety of ways, particularly in her elegiac novel *Hannah's Garden* and her children's story "Jack Straw." Currently at work on a new novel based on an Italian fairy tale in which Death is a major protagonist, she's been contemplating death figures, and I've asked her to give us her thoughts on the subject

"There are characters that are associated with death as death-dealers and death announcers—but I would suggest that they are not Death figures, as in a Mr. or Ms. Death personified Morrigan, the Irish goddess of War, for example, revels in death and carnage She messes with men to make them kill each other because she enjoys the violence of war the taste of fear, of blood, of the madness and anguish that battle brings. But she isn't Death herself, only a creature who delights in witnessing the dying moments of warriors in battle The various incubi and succubi of European folk legend are also death-dealers—their actions always bring death to the luckless mortals who get tangled up with them. But they aren't Death, either. Their interest is in specific individuals—generally those who catch their sexual interest—whereas Death is an equal opportunity killer He/she takes the child, the adult, the old, the young, the strong, the weak—Death doesn't discriminate, but moves over everything in a constantly shifting, unpredictable pattern. That is what is so terrifying, the way death resists being slotted into a known plan. All we know is that it will happen . but never when and never how Tales such as 'Godfather Death' or the medieval 'Dance of Death' specifically address this idea and this terror as opposed to folklore's other death dealing creatures, who have very specific victims that they select Edgar Allan Poe's frightening story 'Masque of the Red Death' plays with the idea that one imagines one can foretell and identify Death, and therefore keep him/her out And what is chilling in the tale is the sheer ease with which Death infiltrates the masque with the rest of the revelers

"I've also been thinking about the differences in those stories where the dead live in an alternate world to ours The Greek god of the Underworld, Hades, is not a Mr Death figure but, rather, he is the King of the Dead, content to rule over the souls who have come to him instead of going out and rubbing them himself Likewise in the Christian tradition, where those who die are 'born to eternal life in heaven or hell' Christ isn't a Mr Death and neither is Satan (especially if one thinks of Dante's image of him, frozen in a bed of ice), although both have something to say about dead souls in the afterlife When we look at myth, specifically at that cycle of tales in which death is brought into the world—often by a bumbling trickster figure—death is rarely personified It moves like a force of nature invisible and ubiquitous Death (like that other now famous slogan) happens But in folk and fairy tales, Death acquires a face, a figure, a point of consolation which allows the protagonist of the tale, when confronted with his or her mortality, to recognize the moment at hand. The personified images of Mr. or Ms Death are generally of the wanderer the traveler, the one not bound by place or position The very anonymity and flexibil-

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ity of personified Death insures the equality with which death meets us all . high and low

"Death is also a mirror reflection of ourselves. In medieval and Renaissance pictorial representations, Death often wears a tattered mirror version of the clothes his victim wears It is, after all, for each of us, *our* Death that we meet, no one else's. In the stories where he appears, Mr. Death is a reflection—a concrete, externalized image of the protagonist's death. And therefore his/her appearance has something to say about the character whose death it is that has arrived. From the Grim Reaper of medieval legend to Fosse's 'woman in white' in the film of his life, *All That Jazz* from Shiva with her voluptuous form and deadly arms to Johnny Depp in Jim Jarmusch's haunting film *Dead Man*, Death appears in a variety of guises but also functions differently as a narrative sign. Coyote's death in trickster myths, for example, is experienced (and read) very differently than the death proffered by the skeletal knight who comes to take the Maiden away. The first isn't really read as permanent, because Coyote always come back to life—while the other is frighteningly permanent. The skeleton reflects what the Maiden will become Indeed what we'll all become

Death is a frequent theme in fairy tales—as are the stark realities of death's aftermath—for many stories begin with the death of one or both of the hero's parents Fairy tale historian

Another of Hans Holbein's woodcuts shows Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise

"So God drove man from Paradise,/ By daily toil to win his bread,/And Death came forth to claim his prize,/ And number all men with the dead"

Marina Warner points out that death in childbirth was far more common in centuries prior to our own, and the prevalence of step-children and orphans in fairy tales reflected a social reality Many of these tales (in the pre-Victorian forms) were exceedingly violent—even those gathered by the Brothers Grimm In editions published for German children Although the Grimms are known to have edited their fairy tales with a heavy hand, stripping them of sensuality and moral ambiguity, they had no such qualms about leaving much of the worst violence intact. (Indeed, as scholar Maria Tatar has noted, in some stories they beefed it up.) Murder, cannibalism, and infanticide are staples of the fairy tale genre From Bluebeard with his chamber of horrors to the goodwife in "The Juniper Tree" who decapitates her hated step-son, death is a very real threat in the tales—yet it does not always have the last word In "Fitcher's Bird" (a Bluebeard variant), the heroine not only outwits the wizard who aims to marry then murder her, but she's able to bring the hacked-up bodies of her predecessors back to life The step-son in "The Juniper Tree" returns to earth in the form of a bird Cinderella's dead mother returns as a fish (in the oldest Chinese version of the story), a cow (in a Scottish variant), or a tree (in the version found in Grimms), watching over her daughter and whispering wise words of advice

Snow White is not merely sleeping but dead in the early versions of her tale—displayed in a glass coffin, her form incorruptible, like a saint's The necrophilic overtones of the story are most evident in a 16th-century Italian version called "The Crystal Casket." In this tale a lovely young girl is persuaded to introduce

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her teacher to her widowed father. Marriage ensues, but instead of gratitude, the teacher treats her step-daughter cruelly. An eagle helps the girl to escape and hides her in a palace of fairies. The step-mother then hires a witch, who sells poisoned sweetmeats to the girl. She eats one and dies. The fairies revive her. The witch strikes again, disguised as a tailoress with a beautiful dress to sell. When the dress is laced up, the girl falls down dead—and this time the fairies will not revive her. (They're miffed that she keeps ignoring their warnings.) They place the girl's body in a fabulous casket, rope the casket to the back of a horse, and send it off to the royal city.

The casket is soon found by the prince, who falls in love with the beautiful "doll" and takes her body home with him. "But my son, she's dead!" protests his mother. The prince will not be parted from his treasure; he locks himself away in a tower with the girl, "consumed by love." Soon he is called away to battle, leaving the doll in the care of his mother. The queen ignores the macabre creature—until a letter arrives warning her of the prince's impending return. Quickly she calls for her chambermaids and commands them to clean the neglected corpse. They do so, spilling water in their haste, badly staining the maiden's dress. The queen thinks quickly. "Take off the dress! We'll have another one made, and my son will never know." As they loosen the laces, the maiden returns to life, confused and alarmed. The queen hears her story with sympathy, dresses the girl in her own royal clothes, and then, oddly, hides the girl behind lock and key when the prince comes home. He immediately asks to see his "wife." (What on earth was he doing in that locked room?) "My son," says the queen, "that girl was dead. She smelled so badly that we buried her." He rages and weeps. The queen relents. The girl is summoned, her story is told, and the two are now properly wed.

This Holbein woodcut is called "Bones of All Men." Its message is that death comes to everyone, no matter their station in life
"Wo! woe! inhabitants of Earth,/ Where blighting cares so keenly strike,/ And, spite of rank, or wealth, or worth,/ Death—Death visit all alike"

Fairy tale scholar Veronica Schanoes notes, "Many fairy tales and myths concern the fantasy that if you love someone enough, you can bring them back from the dead—which was one of the things that inspired my own story, 'How to Bring Someone Back from the Dead' [*The Journal of Mythic Arts*, Autumn 2005]. In fairy tales, that effort is usually successful and the wish is fulfilled: Sleeping Beauty wakes up; Snow White revives, the older sisters in 'Fitcher's Bird' are resuscitated, the heroine recovers her prince in 'East of the Sun, West of the Moon'; etc. But in myth, the stories tend to be more poignantly about the limits of human love and its inability to defeat death: Gilgamesh can't bring back Enki. Achilles can't bring back Patroclus. Theseus cannot rescue Pirithuous; Orpheus fails, and even though she is a goddess, Demeter's love for Persephone can only bring her back part-way."

The fairy tales of Hans Christian Andersen often touch on the subject of death, but the ones that address the subject directly are among his most pious and sentimental, better suited to Victorian tastes than they are to ours today. One of the more interesting of them is "The Story of a Mother," in which Death knocks on a woman's door and takes her beloved son away. The distraught woman determines to follow him, and makes the long journey to Death's realm. There, she finds a greenhouse filled to the bursting with flowers and trees of all sorts—each one representing a single life somewhere on earth. When Death arrives, she tricks him into giving back the life of her son—but Death shows her the future and the terrible life her child will lead. She knows then his death is God's will, and a mercy, and she goes back home empty handed.

Andersen's very best tale about death has deservedly become a classic. "The Nightingale" is the story of a Chinese emperor and a

Further Reading

Novels

- "The Tales of Ketzia Gold" by Kate Bernheimer
- *The Nightingale* by Kristin Darley
- *White As Snow* by Tanith Lee
- *Good Omens* by Neil Gaiman & Terry Pratchett
- *The Farthest Shore* by Ursula K. Le Guin
- *The River Journey* by Robert Nathan
- *Goodmother Night* by Rachel Pollack
- *Hogfather* by Terry Pratchett
- *Hannah's Garden* by Midori Snyder
- *Cards of Grief* by Jane Yolen

Short Stories

- "The Parade of You" [publication info illegible]
- "Death and the Ugly Woman" by Bruce D. Arthurs (published in *Swords and Sorcery #1*)
- "Come Lady Death" by Peter Beagle (published in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *The Rhinoceros Who Quoted Nietzsche*)
- "The Threshold" by A.S. Byatt (published in her [illegible])
- "The Three Caskets" by Jack Dann (published in *Snow White, Blood Red*)
- "Getting Into Death" by Thomas Disch (published in *Getting Into Death and Other Stories*)
- "Mister Death and the Red-Headed Woman" by Helen Exley (published in *Westward the Women: an Anthology of Western Stories by Women*)
- "Death, the Devil, and the Lady in White" by Richard Parks (published in *Realms of Fantasy Magazine*, April 2005)
- "Masque of the Red Death" by Edgar Allan Poe
- "How to Bring Someone Back from the Dead" by Veronica Schanoes (published online in the *The Journal of Mythic Arts*, Autumn [illegible])
- "Black Straw" by Midori Sn[illegible] (from *Things That Ca[illegible]*, *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror, Vol. 3*)
- "The Shape of Things" by Ellen [illegible] (published in *F & SF Magazine*, *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*)
- "The Boy Who Sang for Death" [illegible] (from *Dream Weavers*)
- "Goodmother Death" [illegible] (from *Black Swan, White Raven*)
- "Sister Death" by Jane Yolen (from *Sisters of the Night*)
- "Godfather Death" by Roger Zelazny (published in *Black Thorn, White*)

Nonfiction

- *The Gender of Death: A Cultural History in Art and Literature* by Kari S. Guthrie

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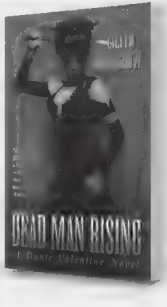

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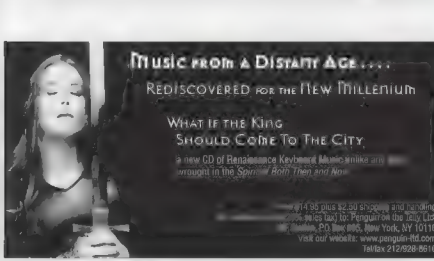
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bird with an exquisite song. The emperor dotes on the bird for a while, then replaces the humble creature with a golden mechanical replicate ... until the night that Death comes for him, squatting heavily on his chest

Opening his eyes he saw it was Death who sat there, wearing the Emperor's crown, handling the Emperor's gold sword, and carrying the Emperor's silk banner. Among the folds of the great velvet curtains there were strangely familiar faces Some were horrible, others gentle and kind They were the Emperor's deeds, good and bad, who came back to him now that Death sat on his heart

Don't you remember?' they whispered one after the other. 'Don't you remember—?' And they told him of things that made the cold sweat run on his forehead

No, I will not remember!' said the Emperor. "Music, music, sound the great drum of China lest I hear what they say!

But nothing will drown out the whispers The emperor's famous mechanical bird sits silent, for there is no one to wind it But then the real nightingale arrives, having heard wind of the emperor's plight. He sings so beautifully that the phantoms fade and even Death stops to listen. The nightingale bargains for the emperor's life, and Death departs."

Death underlines the magical stones that make up *The Arabian Nights*, for it is the reason Scheherazade spins her tales: to save herself and her sister "There's something almost trickster-ish about Scheherazade " comments Midori Snyder "She uses storytelling to keep death at bay --but she does so by never finishing the tale in the morning, where it's conclusion might signal the arrival of her own promised death Instead, she leaves off at a cliffhanger, which requires yet another night to finish—and then promptly starts another tale before the night is over. The moment of completion (the rehearsal of death') *does* come—but in the middle of the night, which enables her to resurrect herself in another tale before the sun rises. So it's as though each story produces its own moment of death, followed by a new work that resurrects the storyteller It's like trickster's death in the Coyote stories . a death that is never final He's always returning, repeating a movement between death and creation

"In fairy tales, too, death is not always final—it's sometimes an agent of change and transformation. Sleeping Beauty in her death-like sleep, Snow White in her glass coffin—this is a mere rehearsal for death, and out of it new life is created (literally, in the case of Sleeping Beauty, who gives birth to twins as she lies asleep and wakes as they try to suckle) In trickster myths, the connection between death and life, destruction and creation, is usually made clear --but in fairy tales too, death is not always an ending, or at least not *just* an ending. It can have within it the seeds of new life, of change, of transformation—which is what these tales, at their most

Continued on page 102

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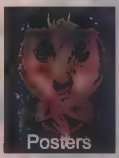

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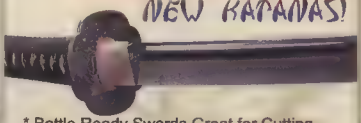

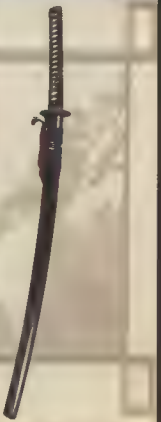

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

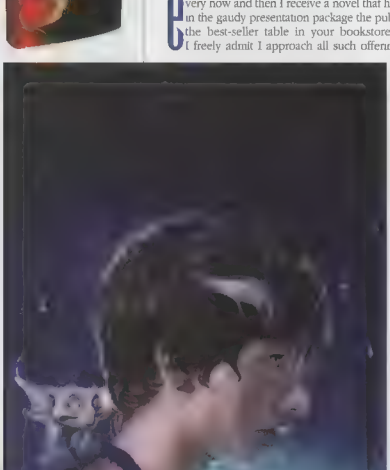
Author Scott Smith weaves an extremely effective little horror tale in *The Ruins*.

Every now and then I receive a novel that has all the earmarks—not just in its own construction but in the gaudy presentation package the publishers send along with it—of being skillfully aimed at the best-seller table in your bookstore. Often that is its one and only objective. Period. I freely admit I approach all such offerings cagily, in the spirit of one reaching out to pet an unknown dog with a funny look in its eyes, but if I am not really put off by something about the cover design or the flap copy or the choice of blurbs or the first couple of paragraphs, I play it fair and read beyond the opening and if things still seem promising I hop and skip a little through the next twenty or so pages to see if that promise seems to be being ful filled and the next thing you know I'm actually reading the book.

There are dangers in having such a generous attitude as there are sinister and highly devious authors around who write profoundly awful books but really and truly know how to set such effective hooks in the reader that he or she (including me) finds it hard, if not nearly impossible, to put the damned things down. I have to admit I respect that talent and very recently was well and truly snared by one such a book that did, indeed, make its way to the best-seller table.

With really admirable skill, the author picked up a very juicy spooky notion, tied it to a locale cleverly selected to back up and ironically enrich that notion and then kept me swinging from one well-constructed cliffhanger to the next until the book's accumulation of howlers and inconsistencies and final casual abandonment of the whole basic premise that had got me started reading the wretched book in the first place forced all that which was decent and upright and honorable in me to toss the damned thing into the wastebasket. But not until, to my everlasting shame, I'd gobbled up nearly two thirds of it.

I'll admit that when I got a copy of ***The Ruins*** (by Scott Smith, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 319 pp., trade hardcover, $24.95) and its accompanying publisher's packet it rang the best-seller alarm bells, but some wise designer in the hire of the Knopf people made sure it was stated in plain English right there on the front cover that its author, Scott Smith, was the excellent fellow who had also written *A Simple Plan*, which I knew to be a really fine little crime story that had the extremely good fortune to get into the hands of producers who saw to it that the book was made into an excellent, no nonsense little movie with a real edge that lingered. So I read it, and a good thing, too.



Obert Skye's Leven Thumps and the Gate way to Foo *is the first in a new series of YA novels. The cover illustration is by Ben Sowards.*

The Ruins starts out pleasantly enough by introducing a little group of Americans who have just survived college and are taking a pleasant, fairly mindless bit of R&R on the sunny beach of Cancun, Mexico, before launching their young selves into the intimidating mysteries of careers and marriages and other processes of growing older and supposedly wiser. As they loll around on the sand they become more or less acquainted with other foreign visitors including an amusing little gang of Greeks who are friendly and eager to play but have no language skills whatsoever and a German who is very unhappy

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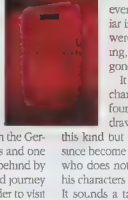
because his brother unexpectedly abandoned the beach and their shared vacation in pursuit of an attractive woman he'd met there but who had left because she'd been hired to work on a project involving an ancient ruin inland with a group of archaeologists.

Smith does a lovely job of painlessly introducing all of these characters and their little quirks and before you know it you're interested in them and their very well presented and quite touching bottomless innocence enough to be more than a little apprehensive when the German manages to rush the Americans and one of the Greeks into using a map left behind by his absent brother and take a rugged journey into the jungle along with him in order to visit the ruin



The author's description of his characters parting from Cancun beach is masterfully ominous. "Suddenly it was . . . too late not to go. They were pulling out into traffic, away from the hotel, the beach, everything that had grown so familiar in the past two weeks. Yes, they were on their way, they were leaving, they were going, they were gone."

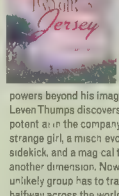
It is obvious Smith is fond of his characters, that he pities them profoundly, and this is by no means a drawback in doing a scary book of this kind but quite the contrary. I have long since become totally convinced that an author who does not wince at the pain inflicted on his characters cannot make his readers wince. It sounds a tad ironic, but in truth there is nothing more necessary to make a good joke funnier or a horror story more horrific than simple compassion.

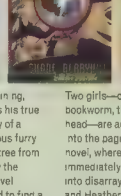
Actually, if there is any serious problem with *The Ruins* it is that Smith's mercilessly clear-eyed view of his characters' weaknesses and limitations more than once caused this reader to pause, lower the book, and stare into space and consider how accurately his description of this or that flaw painfully nailed this said reader's little failings. So let me give you fair warning. This is not a good book for those leery of introspection, particularly those prone to self-deception, that most dangerous of all our failings.

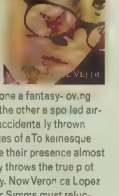
You've probably noticed I've carefully avoided going into the latter stages of the plot of this extremely effective little horror tale and of course the reason is I don't want to spoil it for you. Let me say simply that the German's map works and our brave little band of

NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS

BY MICHAEL JONES

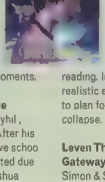






Wuthering High, by Cara Lockwood, MTV Books, 2006. After Miranda Tate acts up once too often, she's sent to the exclusive Bard Academy, a unique boarding reform school that seems to be haunted by dead writers and characters from classic literature. She's in for the most unusual semester of her life, juggling two potential romances with literary ghosts and bizarre plots hatched by an unexpected villain. *Wuthering High* is entertaining, original, and quirky, with some nice twists.

Braced 2 Bite, by Serena Robar, Berkeley Jam, 2006. A chance attack turns high school "princess" Colby Blanchard into a half-vampire, thus throwing her life into absolute chaos. Now she has to learn how to use her new powers, survive high school, and convince the Vampire Council that she deserves to live. The big quest on, though, is who will she take to prom? This is a nice, comedic alternative to the usual vampire fare, with an amusing resolution and some laugh-worthy moments.



Chance Fortune and the Outlaws, by Shane Berryhill, Starscape Books, 2006. After his application to an exclusive school for superhumans is rejected due to his lack of powers, Joshua Blevins reinvents himself as Chance Fortune, luck-manipulating adventurer and gets in. However, getting in turns out to be the easy part. Now he has to make friends, avoid enemies, try not to get killed during classes, and help save the universe from bizarre forces, all without anyone realizing he's powerless. Or is he? A good, fun read, if rather reminiscent of *Sky High*, this is the start to a new series of teenage superhero adventure. I look forward to more adventures starring Chance and his friends.

Life As We Knew It, by Susan Beth Pfeffer, Harcourt, 2006. A teenage girl chronicles the end of civilization as she knows it, after a meteor strike changes the moon's orbit, causing massive destruction around the globe. She's tentatively copes with, and complains her way through, the worst year in recorded history, coming to terms with her own mortality and maturity in the process. This is far better than the usual postapocalyptic fare, with a high yengaging style and a fast-moving plot. Once I started, I couldn't stop reading. In some ways, this was realistic enough to make me want a plan for civilization's possible collapse.

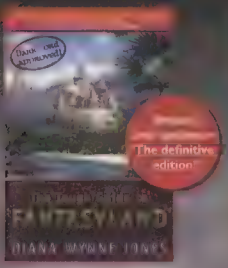
Leven Thumps and the Gateway To Foo, by Obert Skye, Simon & Schuster, 2006. Raised by abusive guardians and possessing powers beyond his imagining, Leven Thumps discovers his true potential in the company of a strange girl, a miscreatures furry sidekick, and a magical tree from another dimension. Now the unlikely group has to travel halfway across the world to find a mystic portal before a terrible villain takes control of it. The start of a new fantasy series, this book has many similarities to Harry Potter, but manages to maintain a unique charm all its own. *Leven Thumps* is sure to appeal to those in need of a quick fantasy fix.

Now You See It, by Vivian Vande Velde, Harcourt, 2006. The accidental discovery of a magical pair of sunglasses plunges Wendy into an adventure unlike any she's ever imagined, culminating in surprise trips into another dimension, and into the past. Elves, witches, dragons, and other magical creatures abound as Wendy tries to make sense of the whole thing, while coping with family history and evil plots. An oddly charming story that makes for a fun read.

The Wizard, the Witch, & Two Girls From Jersey, by Lisa Papademetriou, Razorbill, 2006. Two girls—one a fantasy-loving bookworm, the other a spoiled airhead—are accidentally thrown into the pages of a Teen Beat novel, where their presence almost immediately throws the true plot into disarray. Now Veronica Lopez and Heather Simms must reluctantly work together as they try to keep the entire story from unraveling until they can find a way out. An enjoyable send-up of the traditional "epic fantasy quest" novel, though occasionally sillier than it needs to be. It makes for a nice change of pace, however, and the title says it all.

The Dark of the Woods, edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling, Aladdin Paperbacks, 2006. An omnibus reprint of two earlier collections—*Swan Sister* and *A Wolf at the Door*—this is a collection of fairy tales retold and reinterpreted by some of the best names in YA and fantasy, including Jane Yolen, Neil Gaiman, Gregory Maguire, and Tanith Lee. While aimed at younger readers, these stories don't talk down to their audience. It's definitely worth picking up, with plenty of stories for your money. Sure to appeal to fairy tale lovers and fantasy fans. ❧

Spellbinding Fantasies



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extemporary explorers does find the ruin and it most certainly does, indeed, turn out to be quite a formidable challenge, or rather something in it does

And I'd better give you another warning Smith is also very adept at describing deeply revolting situations and that the something I mentioned is one of the meanest son-of-a-bitch somethings I think I've ever run up against in a story of this kind

I certainly had a lot of innocent fun with the book and my guess is you will too

But it won't be easy on you

Barbara Hambly knows her vampires. She wrote a very fine little series about a likable Victorian couple who did brave battle with legions of extraordinarily imaginative variations of bloodsucking beasties awhile back and then she just stopped dead on it and ever since I've been peevishly wishing she'd come up with a few more

But now all is entirely and totally forgiven because she has turned to the core literary vampire legend of them all, Bram Stoker's Count Dracula, and has used the mysterious, ever intriguing and always tragic Renfield as her lens for carefully and affectionately reexamining and expanding upon the original book and its little galaxy of characters who persist in haunting all of us who've read it

Others have tried to work the same magic, a good many of them choosing to focus on Renfield as does this author, and a fair number of them have come up with excellent and highly entertaining books and short stories. But now that Hambly has given us ***Renfield, Slave of Dracula*** (Berkley Books, New York, 306 pp., trade hardcover, $23.95) it is suddenly made obvious that none of those involved in previous attempts, or at least those I have had the good, good fortune to read, have been sufficiently familiar with the original work, nor loved it deeply enough, to do it justice

It's very clear that Hambly has been as profoundly obsessed with Dracula as the most completely devoted Baker Street Irregular is with Sherlock Holmes. I've not the slightest doubt she could easily give you chapter and verse if you did intense research and fired the most obscure and esoteric questions regarding minutia on any character or locale or episode from Stoker's book. What's more, her lips would part in a serene smile and her eyes would glow as she expounded effortlessly on the details and shadings and, just for fun, sweetly astound you with what all that data might imply.

I am happy to confess that I, for one, am humbled by her understanding of the work and am grateful for the lessons taught in *Renfield*. I thought I understood good old Doctor John Seward pretty well, for example, had a fair notion of his strengths and limitations, a more or less accurate idea of how his mind worked, and even had the gall to believe I was reasonably well informed regarding his feelings concerning Lucy Westerna. Now, having read this book, I know that I was on the whole so remarkably dense and unperceptive that I should really make apologies to all concerned

But my embarrassment there is nothing compared to what I feel when it comes to the extraordinarily misinformed and unperceptive notions I used to hold to be gospel truth regarding the master vampire hunter Abraham Van Helsing. Here in particular I owe Ms. Barbara Hambly the profoundest, the very deepest gratitude. She has opened my eyes to a far greater truth than I had ever grasped before. Now I see how I erred regarding the humanity of this remarkable fellow and have a whole new, far deeper appreciation of what those battling the hungry dead must confront, not only in the enemy but in themselves

There are many extraordinary enlightenments regarding lesser characters in the book. Among them I particularly enjoyed new insights given to Dracula's three wives, not only Hambly's delightfully plausible expansions on the notion I've before encountered that they, like the trio of witches in *Macbeth*, are related to the three mysterious Norns of northern mythology, but her play with their widely differing histories and personalities. I was also moved by her very touching and dead right development of America's contribution to the team of monster hunters, good old Quincy Morris. I have always liked him,

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but I like him even more now that I know him better

Without doubt the greatest and most disturbing of the revelations given in this book are those concerning the eponymous character: Renfield himself. Other attempts to expand on this mysterious fellow have been clever and useful, without a doubt, but the job done by Hambly is outstandingly fascinating because it keeps delving deeper and deeper, going from one dark level to the even darker one beneath down to the very last page.

But it's best I don't even hint at Hambly's touchingly sad discoveries concerning him.

Buy the book and let her tell you herself.

Havoc Swims Jaded (by David Schow, Subterranean Press, Burton, MI, 296 pp , trade hardcover, $25.00) is a collection of 13 (yes, thirteen) short stories by David J. Schow and a foreword called "Front Matter" which is supposedly an adaptation of editorial ephemera written by Bertrand Nightenhauser, the editor-in-chief of *Necropolitan Magazine* for what turned out to be that publication's last issue and is mostly a tirade about Roger DeWitt, Nightenhauser's associate editor, and how Nightenhauser is on to DeWitt's plan to take over *NM* and how Nightenhauser plans to stop him in his tracks. At the very end there is a footnote informing the reader that the whereabouts of neither Nightenhauser nor DeWitt have been successfully accounted for to this date

That would have been bad enough, but the afterword, "Open Mouth, Insert Gun," which really should be must reading in the curriculum for any institution teaching cartooning, writing, or any other freelance art form since its tone is very nicely and succinctly set by a wonderfully reassuring quote from the late, great Gene Fowler (I assume he's dead but it would be a happy surprise to learn he wasn't, so let me know if he isn't): "Writing is easy. All you do is stare at a blank sheet of paper until drops of blood form on your forehead."

But seriously, folks, this is a really great collection of short stories that, in spite of being about incredibly depressing things such as hopelessness, loneliness, and insane cruelty, turns out somehow to be incredibly encouraging. Don't ask me to explain how it does it, but it does. And it won't help explain it if you meet David J. Schow and I know that it won't because I have met him and it didn't explain anything.

I suppose if you put a gun to my head (a situation often encountered in these stories one way or another) I could choose favorites. I might go for "The Absolute Last of the Ultra-Spooky, Super-Scary Hallowe'en Horror Nights" because it manages to say all kinds of contradictory things about horror in our time without being at all contradictory; or "The Five Sisters: A Fable" because it really is a fable and a very good one, too, and it works; or "The Thing Too Hideous To Describe" because I found it heartwarming in a blood-chilling sort of way; or "What Scares You" because it will scare you and "Obsequy" because I like it.

But that doesn't mean I don't like the other ones

Gahan Wilson

Shriek: An Afterword, Jeff VanderMeer, Tor, New York, hardcover, 352 pp , $24.95, ISBN 0-765-31465-7

Although set in Ambergris, the surreal city of fungoid terror explored in the brilliant mosaic novel *City of Saints & Madmen*, Jeff VanderMeer's masterful new novel is no sequel; it is, rather, a parallel construction, one that deepens—quite literally—our understanding of the city and its denizens both above ground and below.

Like all VanderMeer's fiction, *Shriek: An Afterword* combines sophisticated techniques of modern and post-modern narrative with a mischievous pulp sensibility and a genuine affinity for weird horror. But VanderMeer has taken his talent to a whole new level here. The novel is a kind of palimpsest—or perhaps I should say "palincest," for it consists of a manuscript written by one sibling, art-dealer Janice Shriek, about another, her brother, renegade historian Duncan Shriek, with annotations by the latter inserted into the text.

Duncan has been obsessed since childhood with the gray caps, mysterious and murderous mushroom beings who were the original inhabitants of Ambergris and now live beneath the city, emerging with grim regularity to kill or abduct surface-dwellers. In risky expeditions into the gray caps' underworld haunts, he has learned unsettling truths about their power and purpose, he has also become infected with fungal parasites that may slowly be transforming him into a gray cap or worse.

When Duncan disappears, Janice presumes him dead, or as good as, and writes what purports to be an afterword to his most famous book, a history of Ambergris, that quickly turns into "a fevered family chronicle" detailing her brother's underground investigations and theories as well as his doomed relationship with one of his students, Mary Sabon, whom Janice hates with all the jealousy of a sister who is more in love with her brother than she allows herself to admit. That Duncan returns from wherever he vanished to is obvious from his own textual interpolations, written in the absence of Janice, whose fate is one of many mysteries presented in this hallucinatory striptease of a novel.

Reading *Shriek* is like overhearing a drunken late-night conversation, hilarious, appalling, and utterly mesmerizing, between a brother and sister who are rather closer emotionally than is entirely healthy as they wrangle through a lifetime of mutual resentments, betrayals, jealousies, disappointments, and recriminations, with a few ghost stories thrown in for good measure. It is a dazzling performance by VanderMeer.

Soldier of Sidon, Gene Wolfe, Tor, New York, hardcover, 320 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 0-765-31664-1

At last Gene Wolfe returns to the adventures of the amnesiac soldier Latro that he began twenty years ago in *Soldier of the Mist* and *Soldier of Arete*. Readers unfamiliar with these compelling though demanding novels, set in Greece circa 479 BC, should read them before embarking on the latest installment, fortunately, they are available in a single volume, *Latro in the Mist*.

Latro has been cursed by a powerful god Hades to forget everything of importance while he sleeps. He records the events of each day on a scroll, which he then reads upon waking, "reminding" himself of what he has forgotten: where he is, how he got there, the identity of the people around him, and so on. A side effect of Latro's memory loss, or perhaps the result of a head injury suffered in the battle that earned him the goddess's displeasure, is that he can see and speak to gods and goddesses that are invisible to others. Most of these numinous beings are well-disposed toward him, though none are able or willing to lift his curse. Finally, there is some evidence that Latro is himself a god, or at least hosting one: a god trapped within a human body and its broken mind. Latro is an immensely appealing character, with an innate nobility and dignity his tragic condition only brings into sharper relief.

Like its predecessors, *Soldier of Sidon* purports to be the translation of a scroll written by Latro. The action shifts from Greece to Egypt, where Latro's quest to undo his curse takes him down the Nile in the company of, among others, a priest of Set, a vampiric succubus made of wax, and a prostitute named Myt-ser'eu, who becomes his "river wife." Characters from the first two books return, notably the black man called Seven Lions. Gods and goddesses continue play a major role, but these are new—or rather immeasurably older—deities: those of Egypt and the tribes to the south of Egypt. And a new quest is added to the old when Latro loses his sword, Falcata, which was given to him by a river god in Greece.

As Wolfe's prose increasingly recapitulates the confused state of his protagonist's mind readers do not merely come to understand

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Latro's condition, we actually share it. Not that Wolfe writes sloppily, far from it. Rather, by conveying so accurately the chaotic world as Latro perceives it, he robs us of the consolation of knowing more than the narrator, thus rerminding us that, in our own lives, we are no different; in fact, perhaps we are in worse shape. After all, Wolfe seems to be implying, most of us are not even aware of what we have lost and hence do not struggle to regain it.

Soldier of Sidon is a tour de force of narrative obliquity that will baffle, infuriate, and delight, sometumes all at once. And there is at least one more novel to come in the sequence. Perhaps Wolfe will reveal all the answers to the mystery of Latro's past there. But I wouldn t bet on it.

The Stolen Child, Keith Donohue, Nan A. Talese, New York, hardcover, 336 pp., $23.95, ISBN: 0-385-51616-9

Though drawing from the same wellsprings of folklore as the famous poem of the same name by W.B. Yeats, this ambitious first novel takes a decidedly mainstream, realist approach to changelings.

Donohue's changelings—or hobgoblins, as he also calls them—are reminiscent of Michael de Larrabeiti's Borribles. ordinary children who, by an ill-explained magic, cease to age, gain semi-supernatural powers, notably a limited shape-shifting ability, and find themselves cut off from human society, which they fear but also envy. They live in the wild, in small, feral packs or tribes. Since they are too young to increase their numbers sexually, they rely on stealing human children, just as they themselves were once stolen. Each abducted child is replaced by the eldest member of the tribe, who has spent considerable time studying the victim so as to be able to mimic him or her so perfectly in appearance and behavior that even parents are fooled. Once the switch is made, the human child turns into a hobgoblin and the hobgoblin turns back into a human child, beginning once again to age. The magic by which this occurs is never explained; nor does Donohue address the chicken-or-the-egg aspects of the mechanism he has invented to describe the perpetuation of the hobgoblins (as to the matter of their origin, it is never addressed at all). His interests lie elsewhere, in the realm not of fantasy but of realist, psychological fiction.

The Stolen Child consists of two narrative strands, each told in the first person, that come close, draw apart, and finally, climactically, converge before separating again, fundamentally altered. One is the story of Henry Day, who, after his abduction by hobgoblins is given the new name of Aniday; the second is that of the hobgoblin who replaces him. a boy who, until his own abduction over a hundred years ago, was known as Gustav Ungerland but now takes the name and identity of Henry Day. As the years pass, and Gustav grows into the role of Henry, memories of his earlier life come back to haunt him and old abilities resurface, most notably a musical talent that renders him a prodigy at the piano. At the same time, he develops an aversion to his former comrades, fearing that they will expose his charade. Meanwhile, Aniday is unable to let go of his past, unlike his fellow hobgoblins, he is determined to remember who he was. As these two doppelgangers pursue their lost identities, they are inevitably brought into contact with each other, a contact fraught with the potential for violent transformation.

Donohue's depiction of Aniday and his ilk brought the similarly ageless children of Steve Cash's *Meq* novels to mind. But while Cash's books are exuberant fantasy adventures, Donohue maps a darker, more adult territory. Like all of us, Gustav and Aniday have had their childhoods stolen and, from what shards remain, must piece together new identities that will enable them to experience the joys and withstand the sorrows of mature existence.

Paul Witcover

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By Paul Witcover

Laurell K. Hamilton discusses Anita, life, love, sex, and the creative process.

Laurell K. Hamilton put St. Louis on the fantasy map with two best-selling series, the Anita Blake, Vampire Hunter books in which vampires and werewolves come out of the shadows and into the bedroom and, more recently, the Meredith Gentry books featuring elves and other denizens of Faerie living as exiles in contemporary America. We caught up to the prolific author recently, traveling under an assumed name to promote the release of her new Anita Blake novel, Danse Macabre.

PW: Do you do any writing while on tour, or do you concentrate exclusively on signings, interviews, and the like?

LH: For the most part, I have to concentrate exclusively. But on the plane, since I'm not terribly fond of flying, I try to distract myself and so I often will make notes. A tour is pretty much a loss on being able to write.

PW: Do fans at book signings or readings confuse you with Anita?

LH: Early on, they expected me to be more like Anita, in a confusing-fiction-with-fact way. Anita and I are both about the same height. We both have dark hair and look vaguely alike. Maybe not so vaguely. I don't know—it's hard for me to judge. Her voice is also very close to mine.

PW: Did you do that consciously?

LH: Not really, no. The Anita books were the first first-person narrative I ever did. New writers often use the voice that's closest to their own.

PW: So are fans disappointed when they find the resemblance is only skin deep?

LH: I don't think so. In fact, some have said that Anita might be a little intimidating to meet in person. I have a somewhat higher cozy factor.

PW: Do you ever have difficulty separating yourself from Anita? It's not just the physical resemblance—elements of her back story are similar to events in your life.

LH: In trying to create a character that seems real, I find you often, just like an actor, use your own personal experience. One of the biggest blows to me, that shaped me as a person, was my mother's death when I was six. So when I began to write Anita—since at that time I really wasn't sure how much of me was formed from that tragedy—I gave her a similar tragedy. But I made her two years older—she was eight when her mother died. And they've done studies that the older you are when something like that happens, the better you are able to cope. So, you know, Anita's train wreck wasn't quite as early as mine. But what I've found—and I didn't really do this consciously either—but in many ways Anita is like therapy for me. Dealing with her issues helps me deal with mine. That was not a front-of-the-head kind of choice. But as the years have gone on, I've realized that, yeah, actually I do sometimes work on my own pains and issues when I write.

PW: Once you become conscious that process is going on, don't you start to use it in a more directed way, exploring things in your characters that you've wondered about in yourself?

LH: No, because my characters are very real to me, and I have very little control over what they decide they want in their lives. It would be like going up to your best friend and trying to impose your will upon them. It doesn't work that way. At least, not for me. I also find that my subconscious is ahead of me. It usually knows what's going on in the depths of my mind much sooner than I do. I'm often researching issues or looking at issues before they ever come up in my own personal life, or before I'm ever aware that they are anything that has to do with me personally. I believe they're just the character's issue. Then a few books down the road, it hits me.

PW: You really have to trust your subconscious as a writer, don't you?

LH: I look at my subconscious as … The best analogy I can find is a muscle. You start lifting small weights and then you gradually go up, and you get better at it. You're able to lift more weight, do more strenuous workouts. The subconscious and the imagination are like that too. The more you do with it, the more you can do with it. Or at least that's how I find it. My subconscious is one of my greatest assets. It's much closer to the surface than most people's. I discovered that sort of by accident. I went to a therapist; I was trying to get over my fear of flying, because I was coming on tour. I went to a therapist who does something similar to hypnosis, but not exactly. The idea is, the problem you're afraid of will then be worked out at a subconscious level while you're asleep. Well, I woke up the day after I'd had this treatment, and I totally freaked. Because my subconscious isn't below the surface. It was sorting through all the fear right in front of my head. And the therapist told me later that she'd had this problem with other highly creative people. The subconscious of such people is closer to the conscious mind, and so we're

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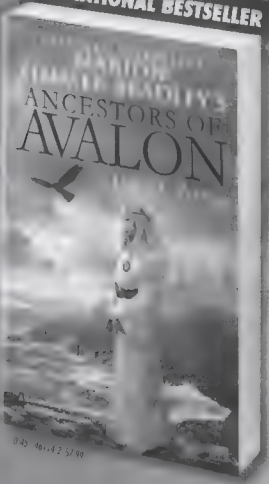

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more aware of the process. Years ago I wasn't, now I can feel it.

PW: How do you mean?

LH: I can actually feel an idea moving around—it's a physical sensation, like something liquid moving in my head. So my subconscious is a wonderful thing. It's part of me, and yet it's not a part I can consciously control, so it feels like it's not quite part of me.

PW: It sounds like active dreaming.

LH: It is in a way, except that it's reversed. In active dreaming, you're trying to impose your conscious mind on your subconscious. And in this, I'm really more trying to get my subconscious to impose on my consciousness. Which actually, if you say it that way, sounds kind of scary! But that is what the process is. That is one of the reasons that I come up with so many ideas. I joke that if I never get another idea, I'll still have enough to write until I get to be two hundred, if I could live that long. I think that's because my subconscious and conscious are very, very close. There's a very thin veil between them. I am a sponge for ideas. Everything inspires me. There's no such thing as a nonexotic locale because the inside of my head is always on. And that can be a problem because it means I never really go off-line either.

PW: Right. I was wondering about that.

LH: Well, I used to worry about it. People were always telling me to take time off. But you know what? This was my hobby before it was my job. And this is what I love to do. So I stopped trying to beat myself up over the fact that this is what I do, and to a certain extent I live with a writer's notebook on me at all times. And my husband is OK with that, and my family is OK with that, so, you know, it is a good thing, not a bad thing. Society seeks to convince you that you should work very, very hard, yet at the same time they are always telling you that if you work too hard, you're a workaholic, and that's bad. You get a very mixed message in this society about work.

PW: Like most of your Anita books, *Danse Macabre* has a title that features as a primary location in the text, in this case Jean-Claude's vampire nightclub. Is there a reason you title so many of your books this way?

LH: I thought of the Anita series at the very beginning as a mystery series. And if you look at mystery series, many of them have naming conventions, so I wanted a naming convention too. My idea was that I would use Jean-Claude's businesses, the vampire and werewolf businesses, as titles. I don't think I really thought this through. I mean, here we are at book fourteen—Micah, of course, didn't have a business title because it was really about Micah's background and story—and it's become harder and harder to have business titles, because you just begin to run out of businesses. Anita is going to have to travel out of St. Louis to find businesses for me to use as titles. I think *Danse Macabre*, though, I originally wanted to use as the title for Book 6, *The Killing Dance*. But at that time, my publisher felt that *Danse Macabre* by Steven King, a nonfiction book about horror, was too fresh in the public mind, and so they wanted me to choose something else. That wasn't a problem this time. Everybody felt enough time had passed.

PW: It occurred to me as I was reading *Danse Macabre* that you employ a technique similar to what in movies would be called single-shot: there are virtually no abrupt scene changes allowing for the passage of time or place. Everything pretty much flows in an unbroken sequence. I wondered if that was a technical challenge you'd set yourself or whether it arose out of the type of story you were telling.

LH: It arose out of the story, but I was aware that it is a difficult thing to do, to keep the interest and the pace and the tension when the camera is right there, static. But that's what the story needed. I have to admit, I wasn't sure I could pull it off. Especially since there's so much dialogue in this book. And what I'm hearing from the fans and readers is that it really does work. You forget that what you've read for the last twenty pages is dialogue. You forget because you're learning so many things about the characters. One person described it as *My Dinner with Andre*, except with vampires and sex.

PW: Speaking of dinner, can you talk a little bit about the notion of food in these books, how it plays into the sexual and political structure of the supernatural world you've created?

LH: You don't mean actual, physical food?

PW: No, more the idea of people as food. Feeding off them in different ways, as Anita does with the ardeur, or as vampires do with blood, or even flesh in a more literal sense, as some of the werecreatures do.

LH: Once you're dealing with vampires, it's almost impossible to not deal with the exchange of power, the exchange of energy. And you know, I've been doing this for a number of years, and one type of power exchange, one type of energy exchange, is very much like another. The way the politics is run among the vampires, they look at it as you are going to lose a little bit of blood in every political maneuver. That pound of flesh. They're very aware of the reality of power exchange. It sometimes seems to me that human politicians pretend the decisions they have to make are not as important as they really are. Vampires don't do that. The vampires treat every decision as if it's life and death, and I find that kind of refreshing, because it's true. One of the things I did to prepare myself for writing about my vampires was to read Machiavelli's *The Prince*. If you really want to know how my vampires think, that's the book to read. But I also looked at real politics through history, especially the French court of the *ancien regime*.

PW: That was an influence in the Meredith Gentry books too, wasn't it? I'm thinking of the secular and unseelie courts.

LH: Since I'd already researched the French court for Jean-Claude and the vampires, it did lend itself. It was in my head when I was sitting down to start the Meredith series.

PW: Sex in your books is another means of power exchange: physical, social, magical. Anita's development as a character has been influenced by all of that, but for her there is a romantic component that many of the nonhuman characters find unusual, at least at first. Isn't Anita changing the vampires and weres as much as they are changing her?

LH: Yes, that is what is happening. As Anita is becoming more comfortable with her sexuality, she is bringing her values to that sexuality, and for her, it's not just an exchange of sex, there has to be an emotional exchange as well. In many ways, it raises the stakes. One of the things I least understand—and I've talked to people, maybe a hundred, maybe more, interviewed them about sex—and one of the things I least understand when talking to people is the idea of casual sex. You meet someone, you think they're cute, you go have sex with them. I could no more do that than fly. It just doesn't make sense to me. For me, there has to be an emotional component. I have to like the person. I have to know what books they've read. Anita does too. So that means that if you have sex with Anita, it raises the stakes. This isn't some person that you're just having hot sex with. There's cost to it. There's cost politically, there's cost emotionally. By raising the emotional stakes, by making it not just about sex, and not even just about power, but about emotion, about love, the stakes are as high as they can be.

PW: Do you think some fans and critics miss that angle? I mean, there are those who were upset by your decision to explore your characters' sexuality more overtly and explicitly.

LH: Frankly, I don't feel the need to justify the sex. So many people talk about sex as if there's something intrinsically wrong with it. I don't believe that. What seems to bother a lot of people is that I'm a woman and that Anita is a woman. And there's still this Victorian idea hanging around that we're not allowed to enjoy sex. That if a woman enjoys sex, then she's automatically a bad person. I have no idea why this is still hanging around, but it's wrong. Sex is a gift. It's supposed to be fun or we'd have died out as a species ages ago. To me, Anita is a person who tries to make love—she tries to bring love or emotion to every relationship. And that's actually part of the problem. She's incapable of being casual. And some of the relationships need to be casual if they're just going to be about food. But she's not capable of making them just about food. A lot of the problems she's having, and continues to have in this book, occur because she doesn't know how to do a relationship except one way, which is to give her all to it. And you can't give your all to this many people. There's just not enough of you. One of the things we'll be exploring in future books, which we've begun to explore here, is how everybody can possibly find enough in

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a relationship. How you can meet everybody's emotional needs.

PW: When you first started moving the series in this direction, was that something you resisted? Was it difficult for you to realize that you had to bring the sexual component more out into the open?

LH: I actually planned never to have sex in the series at all, because it's so hard to do good sex on paper. It's so hard to make it anywhere approaching the actual event and how it actually feels. So I planned to avoid that. Then, when I realized we finally were going to have sex on paper, I was very uncomfortable with the thought of writing it. One, I didn't know if it could be done well. Two, I am a small-town Midwestern girl raised by someone who thought that all sex was bad. And it was uncomfortable at first. The first scene in Book 6 with Jean-Claude and Anita was something that I had to rewrite several different times because I was embarrassed. It felt very, very personal because by that time Anita felt very personal to me. So it was almost voyeuristic, not in a way I enjoyed. As the books have continued, I've kind of gotten over that. It doesn't bother me anymore. On paper, the camera stays through the violence, so why shouldn't it stay through the sex? It's a very American thing not to be bothered when the camera stays on the violence but to be bothered when it stays on the sex. You can kill as many people as you want, and nobody thinks anything of it. But if you have good sex, oh my God.

PW: Especially if there's no punishment involved.

LH: It drives me nuts. I'll save you the fifteen-minute tirade, but I decided that once we were having sex in the books, it was going to be good sex, and it was going to be enjoyable for everybody included, and we weren't going to be punished for it. Or at least not any more than every once in a while when a relationship doesn't work out. Because so much of literature, and especially women characters—

PW: In horror especially . . .

LH: Yes. Only virgins survive. Any time you have sex, you are the next victim. And even if you don't die, something horrible happens because of it. Horror is like the last remnants of a morality play. It is about the idea that there is something scary and wrong about sex, and I don't believe that. It's like everything else: it can have its dark side and its light side.

PW: Did you consciously set out to mix various genres in your work?

LH: Very consciously. I took my favorite bits of mysteries, especially hard-boiled mysteries, and my favorite bits of horror, my favorite bits of all the genres. I thought, why choose? Truthfully, by making it mixed genre, I didn't do myself any favors, at least at first. Nobody wanted it. I had publisher after publisher reject the first Anita book on the grounds that mixed genre doesn't sell. Vampire fiction doesn't sell. And thus Anita will never sell.

PW: Oops.

LH: They've since kind of eaten their words, but at the time, they literally made a blanket statement that mixed genre does not sell. My success has led to them wanting mixed genre, to them actually requesting that people do the very thing that ten years ago they told me wouldn't sell. Which is interesting. So yes, I deliberately chose my favorite bits and pieces from the different genres, because I love genre. But that said, I didn't want to follow the conventions. I set out very consciously to break them. Except for the one convention I didn't know existed, which I went ahead and broke anyway.

PW: What was that?

LH: The romance convention, because I didn't intend this to be a romantic series. I fought tooth and nail to not have Jean-Claude be a romantic lead. I thought, the French vampire romantic lead—it's too clichéd, I can't possibly bring anything new to this idea. So I tried not to do it. You mentioned earlier how some of the fans were upset—well, this is one of the things that upset them. Someone who is more conversant with the wider romance tropes explained to me what I had done wrong and why people felt betrayed. She said that I had done through several books what most romance novels do in one, which is the girl meets the tall, dark, bad guy, is attracted to him, and then the good guy comes along and she of course falls in love with him and doesn't go with the bad guy and you have a happy-ever-after ending. Well, Jean-Claude was supposed to be the bad guy that you dump, Richard was supposed to be the good guy that you marry, and they were supposed to live happily ever after. Except it didn't happen. And some of the people who were convinced that this was going to follow standard romance felt betrayed. And I'm sorry, but I actually didn't realize I was breaking any great rule with that one. I didn't even understand that I had done it until after everybody was very, very upset, and then somebody finally explained it to me.

PW: A lot of people don't know that your first published novel, *Nightseer*, was a heroic fantasy.

LH: You know, Anita might never have existed if that book had sold well. It was the first book of a series, but it didn't sell well enough for the publisher to go on. Because what I really wanted to write was heroic fantasy. That was my first love. It wasn't until the bottom fell out of the market that I went back through my story files and found an Anita short story. I read it over and thought, well, that's pretty cool, I wonder if we can make a book out of it? And by golly, we did.

PW: Do you ever think about returning to heroic fantasy?

LH: I would love to go back after Merry is finished and maybe finish the Nightseer series, but I'm a little worried, because I'm a different writer than I was then. The camera that I put on my writing now is unflinching. It doesn't do the 1940s-pan or dissolve for anything. And I'm not sure I want to tell that story with that harsh a camera. But it would be interesting to write heroic fantasy at this point. In many ways, I'm a lusher writer than I was. Yet my writing is also pared down; it is stripped away of pretense. If you have something that's going to happen in a scene, you see it. If it's emotionally painful, tough. You're there for it. If it's wonderful and romantic, you're there for it. If it's personal, you're still there for it. It's a very challenging way to write because it means that you never get to skip anything, if it's hard on your character, it's also hard on you as a writer.

PW: Your blog provides a really generous peek into the daily life of a writer, with all its ups and downs. Was a similar ethos at work there, that you just wanted to leave the camera on?

LH: You're not the first one to say something similar. Fans feel very much like they're getting a glimpse into my life, and they're very touched by it. But to me it doesn't feel as personal as everyone seems to take it. Maybe because I know what's left out. A blog is a seductive sort of thing. It feels like a diary, but it's not. A diary's private. And if you're not careful with a blog, you'll sometimes forget that. So I always have my husband or our assistant read it over to make sure I haven't let any cats too far out of the bag. But if I was going to do the blog, I thought it needed to be real enough to matter. I wanted it to be worthwhile for people to read. So I do try to show that all of us have bad days, just as we have good days. That just because I'm doing as well as I am and have done it as long as I have doesn't mean that I've got all the tricks of the trade down.

PW: It strips away a lot of romantic notions about creativity and writing.

LH: I am not an advocate of the ivory tower school. I really am not. But nor am I a Hemingwayesque writer, where you've got to get down into the nitty-gritty. There's got to be a middle ground between those two. And that is what I'm about on the writing, as much as any writer can be. Cause we're very bad at middle ground. Writers, artists of all kinds. But I strive for it. You know, I have a child, and that changes things. You strive to give the child as normal a life as you can. You strive to not be so out there that you don't prepare them to live in the real world.

PW: But then that, too, becomes grist for the mill.

LH: As I said earlier, being a writer is something that I never really turn off. There's no way to turn it off. So the day-to-day domestic, the day-to-day life, is interwoven with it, and the blog shows that. I read—I can't remember what writer it was; a famous literary writer of a few decades past. Anyway, I read stories about his family tip-toeing through the house, and the servants tip-toeing around him, because the great man was writing. And as I'm

Continued on page 102

Even fairy tales have a dark side.

valiant

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Lost Wax

By Leah Bobet Illustration by HyeJeong Park

In the Factory at Calendar Point, the carvers and the wizards and the casters make magic. Simon sweeps up.

The wax is carted in from beekeepers scattered across the country, each licensed and watched and reporting to the provost every season on the movement of their flocks. Simon washes the floors after the carters have come and gone. He helps carry the crates to the carvers sometimes and the book-dusty theoreticians, one sketching the sigils from diagrams on brittle parchment and the others taking knife to wax, molding them in three dimensions. He gathers the curls of spare wax from the floor and burns them in the fire that feeds the casting crucible.

In the afternoons Simon brings water to the potters, who paint clay carefully on the carved wax molds, in the evenings he scrubs their wheels and tools, soaking them in water until his fingers wrinkle. He does not clean the casting crucible, that is Jan's work, stoop-shouldered and sure-fingered, and old as his grandfather was on the day the farm passed to his father and his own indenture began in truth.

At the precise trembling moment between day and dusk, the sigils and guardians are cast. Wax puddles out of the molds, spreads across the catchbasin, and molten metal is poured in its place. Simon never sees the finished product. He empties the catchbasins, one by one, pouring thick and lazy drops of wax into the reservoir. The magic is in the wax, he's heard them say. He is careful. He does not spill a drop.

Come morning, the orders are delivered to students, wizards, kings, and rich men by couriers in dashing clothes of all colors none ever the same. It would not do to identify a Factory courier to footpads and thieves. Some days Simon thinks he might become a courier in lord's livery, and when he thinks this he sweeps harder and harder until the Factory shines like the moon. Jan watches him with even looks when this bright mood is upon him, and sends him away: Check the carvers' floor one more time, perhaps empty the chamberpots, dust the lintels so the specks do not get in the molds. Jan is old and his hands are covered in soot. Simon does not get angry when he invents these tasks.

It is a great honor to work at the Factory. It is a great honor to carry its broom in your hands, for even brooms can be full of magic.

The things that can't be tamed are the things we can't let inside. But how we'd miss them if they didn't exist at all.

Simon comes home at dusk, smelling of smoke and sweat and honest labor. He lets a room in a boarding house off Progress Square that was still Bear's Heart Square when he arrived, but people call it Progress already and the old name is near-forgotten. He eats in the kitchen there, simple, clean country food a day or two paler from the long trip to bring it to Calendar Point, or from a street vendor when it is middle-month or end-month and his pockets hold a neat packet of coin. There is smoke in the streets, and music. He practices his letters reading pamphlets pasted on walls or drifting through the streets, and dreams of attending lectures, of fairs bursting with wild animals and sleight-of-hand shows. He pays his rent, and sends money home to his family to pay for his labor lost, and hoards the rest in a box beneath his bed against a lack of imagination for luxury.

Every night Simon shuts his doors, pulls the curtain over his rounded quartered-compass window, and draws the curls of used wax from the stitching of his pocket.

He comes home with pockets heavy with wax: they are torn and mended and torn again once his clumsy stitching wears away or breaks—he is too timid to ask the house laundress to mend them true. The boarding house mistress and the herb lady do not watch him as he slips into his penny-garret, they privately wonder over tea if he is smuggling opium or casting-metals, and just as quickly dismiss those thoughts. Were Simon Lake a smuggler, he would not pay his rent in such small, well fingered coins. The mistress's daughter fancies that he carries books, that he is a man of words and deep river-thoughts, but she is of the right age to fill a silent young man's figure with ideas that were never there

Over gaslight he melts the fragments into his wooden wash-bowl until they are soft and ready, and molds them close into the cloudy block that started off a finger's width, then a palm's width, then an imperfect factory standard size. The mistress's dishwasher does not report him; he knows all the ways to remove wax from wood, from stone from cloth

It has taken him time to learn to carve wax—it is softer than wood and cannot be whittled. It is harder than dirt and cannot be molded. His rejects he burns in the crucible fires, eased back into the Factory in bits and crumbled pieces. This time, he thinks, every time the block grows strong and whole. This time will be the one, and he wishes

The knife flicks, and he whispers the words into the cracks made by his tiny fingernail blade: *Give me a better life. Bring me a better life. Bring me something, a sign, a hope.*

The grayish wax breathes and sighs, but there is no smell of magic, just a faint hint of rotten rosemary from the street where the herb lady has dumped her unsold and unsellable wares. Simon taps it with a finger, and it does not reach out, or speak, or scowl. Leftover magic, defective and drained. The wax used before casting is buttery and soft-golden and smells like the best breakfast you never had.

The bed creaks, and his hand trembles, and the house shifts on its foundations in its sleep. Simon puts his half-formed sigil in the drawer beneath his holiday clothes, and sleeps, and dreams of candlelight

Simon sweeps the Factory floor as the long afternoon moves on, shifting shadows so he is never sure which planks he has caressed with the straw broom and which left untouched. He stares at the curling shards longingly, treasure and firelight around his feet. The guards will collect his dustpan at the end of the morning; he has never dared palm even a sliver of virgin wax. The penalty—in the bindings they would place on his hands and the shame he would place on himself for having to beg again for a position—is too great. But the wizards who watch the Factory and grounds do not clap him in irons for seditious thought; his mind is filled with lake stillness.

Jan sees through it, sees past it, and takes the broom from him. He sends Simon to wash the potter's tables again, six hours ahead of normal, and threatens the whip if there remains a speck of gray upon the polished, varnished, scarred wood tables. Simon inhales clay dust that coats his tongue and throat, smoke from the kilns, smoke from the crucibles in the sheltered room next door. The air in the Factory tastes like something tangible, not alive but perhaps conscious. The sound of the whistle that calls end to day's work knows that it has a name

Today, they call his name, only to his ears. Today, they murmur to him, and nobody else hears, but the wizards on duty frown and tap instruments, smell the air, consult their heavy necklaces and pocket-watch-chains of charms, their good clean bowler hats just slightly askew. *Simon Lake, Simon Lake* meanders through his consciousness. The shards in the dustpan spell it out. The dust on the tables vibrates with it, and when he pours the day's wax from the catchbasin into the reservoir, it hits with a note that reminds him of his own voice raised in laughter, or anger, or debate

Magic is everywhere you look for it in the Factory. It is the motion of the air. At shift's end, Simon follows the air and the whistle and the dust kin out the door, and into the streets of the city

Steam trains run into the stockyards, and he smells the low moaning of cattle imported to the slaughterhouses for meat and leather. Farmer's carts rattle along the roads, bringing in the produce to be sold at market the next morning; the sound stirs memory in him, and the urge to flee to ground. Sweaty and dirt-smeared men laugh and joke along the streets, leaving jobs at other factories, ones that make more mundane things. He sees them, and sees what he might be in ten years, or twenty, and shudders.

Why did you come to the city? a keening, whispering voice asks. Simon looks around, but there is nobody there to speak so clean and fairly—nothing but the wind. His heart quickens. Perhaps it is a wizard-voice. Perhaps he has been chosen for a great task

Perhaps it is his sign.

"I came, sir," he tells it, clearing his throat as if addressing the foreman, "to gain a better life."

And have you found it? ask the cobblestones, and the spaces between them, ground with manure and dust and grass seeds.

He clutches his hands in front of his body, tight in one another. He has a room and hot potatoes with cheese on payday. He is paying off his indenture to the soil. The house mistress's daughter seems to like him. His parents, if not proud, are not disappointed

He shakes his head. "I've taken wax," he confesses, not knowing to who, but knowing he should; he must be honest now. "If I had magic—"

There is magic in a bear's heart, so the name has been erased. There is magic in a falcon's claw, clutched at the moment of dying. There is magic in things and not just symbols, it whispers, and he listens. *Factory magic is not your kind of magic.*

"Then what shall I do?" he whispers, his carving hand growing stiff from tension.

We have been looking some time, it says, pondering and sweet, *for a vessel, a mold, a thing well designed and willing. Are you willing?* it asks, and he draws in a breath

"Yes," he says, elated and terrified and strung tight with delicious vindication—his sign is here at last. "Oh yes."

Look to where things are still, the murmur says, tasting of sweet peas at first picking and old blood and sunshine. *You will find your advancement there.*

A pair of beat cops come around the corner, one twirling his baton idly, chattering away to the other. Simon closes his mouth, shoves his hands in his pockets, and makes his long way home to Progress Square, vowing in his head to call it Bear's Heart Square forever more.

There are a lot of stillnesses in his head; it is why he is permitted to work in the Factory. He spreads out on his mattress that night and dives into them, dives deep.

There is no magic there. His dreams are of floorboards, and rafters.

and shaped, squared things. He dreams in symbols and metal and wax, and when he wakes, he weeps.

He touches his knife to the wax that night, and whispers new words into the scores and cuts and careful curves. *Give me magic. Let me touch magic.*

That is not the way, the hissing voice of wild magic whispers, but it is the only way he knows. The knife slips, draws blood, and he bandages the finger and keeps going. The night falls silent. He carves until dawn.

Simon goes to the Factory sleepy-eyed and haggard. There is wax beneath his fingernails, and he does not notice or care. Jan takes him aside immediately and sends him to scrub, and chastises him loudly for not doing so the night before. Simon knows he is trying to help. Simon knows he is trying to save his job and his prospects. He scrubs with a knot of resentment building in his belly, and comes out to report sullen and with his eyes downcast.

Jan takes him into the potters' room, where the workers have not yet come in for the day. "What," he asks, "has happened to make you so prickly and careless?"

"There is no magic in me," Simon whispers, realizing that Jan has known all along about his small thefts of wax, about his yearning and sleepless evenings, and clenches his fists tighter.

"There is no magic in anyone," Jan says, severe, drawn-faced. "They just borrow it for a while."

Simon looks down at the older man's hands, curled around the broom like a falcon's claw at the moment of dying. "We could make it," he says. "We could make our own and get out of here. It spoke to me—" he says, and Jan holds up a hand.

"Magic isn't to be wanted. Magic is to be feared," he says, soft, between the murmuring creaks of machinery and the shouts of vendors in the city outside the Factory gates. "Anything that must be chained to serve will destroy you, and anything worth chaining to serve can do the job right and full."

Simon looks at his feet, at the unraveling leather shoes that they gave him on his first day at the Factory. He did not know Jan felt himself a philosopher. "Wizards," he says, "wear fine suits and cast spells to their own design. They pay in gold. I've seen their houses—" and he has, everyone who lives or dwells a while in Calendar Point has seen those graceful, towering spires "—and their children. They never frown, except when they're thinking of something terrible and great."

Jan is silent for a long time. "Sometimes I forget how young you are," he says roughly, and puts his curled and ruined hand on Simon's shoulder.

He pulls away. He leaves the Factory, his broom still in the cubby. He goes into the stockyards, into the sewers, into the streets, looking for somewhere that is truly still, and by nightfall he is truly lost. Darkened buildings rise above him like forest trees, there are no gaslights on these streets, and there are no signs, and no smells to light his way to somewhere cleaner and bigger and less secret.

"Magic?" he calls out, not knowing it by any older or other name.

Simon Lake, it murmurs, heady and hesitant. *What is it you truly want?*

"Magic," he says again, closing his eyes. "I don't want to be a farmhand anymore. I don't want to be a cleaner. I want to be like them—the people who are always smiling."

You want to be special. You want to inspire, fear, or hope, or doubt.

"I want to be an honor," he says, and the words come formal to his lips, and for the first time, he is very afraid indeed. But the wanting is stronger, the wanting was always stronger: to be more than one is, to be great, to be the cause of something. The wild magic smells that, and despairs, and rejoices.

Very well, the magic says, grim and sad and ready. *Very well.*

Simon lifts his head up to the sky, opens his mouth and his arms, closes his eyes. *Come in,* he cries out to it, voiceless, all the lake stillness gone forever from his mind. *Come into me.*

The world rushes into flame and light.

The mages find him at sunrise, legs deer-quick, ears wolf-sharp, only his eyes still his own. They bring him before the wizard-magistrate, who looks upon him and calls him Simon Lake, who works in the Factory (an honor, that), who rents off Progress Square. They find his hoard of pennies, and they find his hoard of wax, half-carved into trees, into civic fountains, into the houses of the great and the small animals that haunt the lake country, stealing corn and nuts and fruit. The boarding house mistress watches the wizards with eyes round as a rabbit's, and her daughter cries. The herb lady nods as if some great mystery is resolved, flirts with the inspector, and is turned away back to her tea and wares.

There is no trial. There never is, with magic involved.

They hang him at high noon, and the wild magic whispers in his ear, *hush hush,* as the trap opens and the knot tightens and his legs kick in the air. The papers say hangings are a quick death, the knot striking one just so and the suffering brief. Simon strangles slowly as the goodwives and children watch. His hands clench like those of a dying falcon, and his bear's heart bursts, and the blood bubbles at his mouth before they cut him down and pronounce him.

"This," call out the street preachers, the dervishes, the mad, "is why it is foolish to toy with stolen magic. This is how you lose your soul!"

The crowd wails and shudders in terrified glee. A few young ones turn away, lips twisted. A few more of them follow the wind than might have otherwise: cobbler's boys, and shop clerks, and a heavy young woman who hastes fine gowns together for the third best seamstress in the city. They dream of bees that night, and wake up hungry, and do not go to hangings anymore. They meet, and marry, and open up public houses and greenhouses and places where things are still, and they allow no man-made magic in their homes, and they never speak of this day. They mark their doors with a sprig of rosemary, for remembrance, until they forget what it means or who hung their cutting first. Nobody who writes in decades to come about the Rosemary Revolution speaks of this day, or this hanging, it is forgotten by its own historians. It sleeps in peace, and it is still.

His parents come for his body, his mother weeping, his father's face hard as cobblestone streets. They bury him on the farm and plant an apple tree atop the grave. The roots twist down and empty his coffin of those things that fall away in earth, leaving good hard applewood and bone in the shape of a man, a young man, one barely past his fifteenth birthday. The substance drains out of him, dirtied and spent into the catchbasin of the soil, and something else fills the gap that is left behind.

The apple tree bears bewitching fruit. Those who bite into it go a little mad, for a while. They smell things that are not there, they see things that have never graced the lake country, machines and dirty streets and the way a night sky looks through haze and smoke. They mostly go to the city, they stay in certain public houses, they eat fruit from certain greenhouses. They make friends, and they do not visit home. They never quite fit into the lake country again, after that taste.

There is a storm on the night ten years after Simon's death. The apple tree cracks and falls, splitting into two at the touch of lightning. The children from the farms and the village crowd around it, all afraid to touch: the children are afraid of that spot. Already they do not remember why.

The stump is uprooted and they find the roots broken, the space between them cradling the shape of a man, the bones of a man poured out on the ground between them like lost wax after the casting.

They split the mold, but there is nothing inside at all.

It remembers brooms. It remembers that things should always be clean, and clear, and true. Falcon's-Claw-Bear's-Heart, smelling of apples and rain and moving like wind and purpose, takes its first steps toward the taste of the city. ❧

When a swordsman and a wizard construct a hot-air balloon to fight moonmen, well, pretty much anything can happen from there ...

In the Lair of the Moonmen

BY JON HANSEN ✦ ILLUSTRATION BY T[illegible]

I. Among the Gods

Varkez, Lieutenant of the City Guard of Nucidad and Prince of the Seventh Rank, crawled on his belly before the great idol. The fact that the idol was a giant jade frog only heightened his sense of embarrassment.

He considered hopping a little, but decided against it. What would be gained? And what might be lost? All sorts of eyes watched from the shadows. They might take it as mocking disrespect. Groveling, on the other hand, was desired by most deities and their priests. It had made Varkez's clothing choice difficult, trying to pick something prosperous looking to show respect, but not so expensive that he could not afford to replace it if stained.

These were his thoughts as he backed away, keeping head down. The idol, polished daily by novices, sat in the center of a gigantic lily pad. He knew he had left the pad once his knees touched the cold marble floor. With a sigh he stood, brushed a hand across the green streaks on his knees.

"Ah, Lord Varkez," came a voice behind him. "Was your communion with the Frog Lord satisfactory?"

Varkez turned to greet the high priest. He'd seen this one before. Ribon, a rather pop-eyed specimen, like all Frog Lord priests. Protruding eyes were a common feature of this order, but Varkez had once seen a priest with a rather greenish hue.

Varkez bowed, short but correct. "Tolerably well, I think," he said. He glanced back toward the idol and the offering he had set before it: a carved ivory statue of a fly, roughly the span of his hand, with tiny inlaid rubies for eyes. "I suppose it will depend on how the Frog Lord looks upon my gift."

Ribon put what he doubtless considered a wise look on his face. "I am certain it will be acceptable. Our lord is not a voracious deity, after all."

Voracious enough, thought Varkez, but settled for bowing once more before taking his leave. As he left the temple a croaking chorus from the moat greeted him. A guard, tall in green lacquer breast plate, saluted as he passed. "Silence is taken to mean you lack the god's favor," he said in a voice rough with drink. "A good sign for your petition, sir."

Varkez gave a half-smile. "I hope so," he said, as he crossed the bridge to the street.

On the far side stood Crio, patience in gray robes. He bowed at Varkez's approach, much deeper than Varkez had granted the priest. "I trust it went well, sir?" he said in cool tones.

If I showed up with the Frog Lord's stain across my knees." He turned and headed down the street. Cno a half-step behind.

Their boot heels clattered in rhythm as they strode down the cobblestones, passing priests, pilgrims, and thieves disguised as pilgrims along the way. Varkez kept one hand on his dress scimitar, partly to keep it from catching in his garb, partly to inform all who saw him that he was a gentleman and, most importantly, armed.

"I hope the Council of the First Rank makes their decisions for promotion soon," said Varkez. He grimaced. "Currying favor with the gods during festival is expensive. Oh, for the good old days when all one needed to get ahead was to bribe a single authority. Not a hundred." He glanced back to Cno. "What gifts remain?"

Ever cautious, Crio's hands did not even twitch toward the heavy leather bag at his belt. "The pickled ginger essence for Har-Vala, the miniature crystal tiger for Shabeth the Cat King, the pierced coin necklace for the merchant avatar Ptauag—"

Varkez's hand flew up. "I believe I will have need of the necklace later this evening."

"My lord?" Crio's tone was puzzled. "None of Ptauag's franchise temples are considered acceptable for donations of this sort, and you will have no opportunity to reach the main temple—" Crio broke off. "Ah. Priestess Satara. I see."

"You see nothing!" said Varkez.

Cno did not reply, but his expression said volumes.

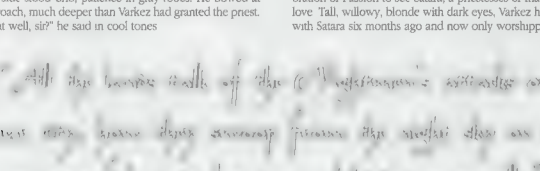
II. The Wizard Arrives

"And the way Eyra laughed that night, I thought my heart would break," said Alondro, then sighed. Varkez winced and tried to pay attention to the road and the night sky at the same time. Not for the last time he cursed Captain Prahlen's insistence on having lieutenants stand tune on duty. Not that the captain did. 'The Fifth Rank hath its privilege,' Prahlen would intone in solemn tones.

"Have I ever told you about Eyra's eyes?" said Alondro. Varkez closed his.

Alondro's love for the pleasantly plump Eyra knew no restraint, except that imposed by their parents. The two were second cousins, a detail keeping Alondro mooning, the relationship unrequited.

Unlike Varkez's love for Satara. True to Cno's suspicions, Varkez had managed to squeeze in a quick visit to the Temple of the Celebration of Passion to see Satara, a priestesses of Inasadi, goddess of love. Tall, willowy, blonde with dark eyes, Varkez had fallen in love with Satara six months ago and now only worshipped with her. He



Varkez nodded back at the frog chorus still croaking. "They seem to think so." He looked up, trying to make out the stars through the smoke rising from the city. He could not. "How are we doing?"

Cno pulled a short list from his sleeve. "You still have more temples to pay homage to, but I believe it too late tonight. You're due at the gate in less than an hour, and the closest temple remaining is that of Har-Vala, Lord of—"

"—A Thousand and Two Odors," said Varkez with a groan.

Crio nodded. "And you've no time to visit the baths afterward."

"Very well," said Varkez. "Let us head for home so I might change." He gestured at his outfit. "I'd never hear the end of it from Prahlen if he had presented Satara with the necklace before performing the rites. Of necessity, it had been quick. But despite the physical satisfaction, Varkez remained frustrated.

Although Varkez had insisted the necklace was a gift for her, afterward Satara informed him he could look forward to three more visits to the goddess before fair value had been exchanged. Didn't she comprehend the depth of his affections for her? He worked to reach the sixth rank to be able to marry who he pleased, but what was the point? Satara appeared not at all interested in him on a personal level.

His musings and Alondro's rhapsody came to an end when a voice hailed them from below.

They peered over the wall Before the gates, respectably out of bowshot, stood a man. He leaned on a long staff, the end of which glowed with a yellowish hue.

"A conjurer, unless I miss my guess," said Alondro "Who are you?" he cried

"Is this Nucidad?" the man cried back The wind caught at the sound, but an accent definitely colored his voice

"This is the only city for fifty miles on the River Lo," said Varkez. "Of course "

"Excellent," said the man, and started forward Alondro and Varkez assessed him as he approached Beside the staff, he appeared unarmed His clothes were good quality for traveling, but still splattered with mud in places. Only his scarlet cloak seemed clean. His face was old and lean, and had a hungry look. *For something beside food,* Varkez thought.

The man paused before the gates "I wish to enter," he said.

"I am sorry, friend," said Varkez "But the city is celebrating the Festival of Righteous Worship By order of the elected King Ramnout, the Council of the Nine Princes of the First Rank, and the Temples of Nucidad, the gates are not to be opened for another five days "

The man cocked his head "How are supplies brought inside?"

Varkez smiled. "The wise already laid in stockpiles The cheap make camp outside the walls and wait for the festival's end." He pointed toward an encampment of tents some distance from the road. "And the needful pay to have goods and personages hauled over the wall This is a service provided by the temples to give their younger priests some exercise. I'm told the fees are quite reasonable "

The man snorted. "I am an old man and have no wish to suffer such indignity Are there no exceptions?"

Varkez glanced at Alondro "Of course. A few years ago, when the Grand Vizier of the Yellow Wall and his party paid an unfortunately timed visit, the gates were opened rather than risk a diplomatic incident But if you are not a lord of some sort, it would require a most excellent reason "

The man smiled

"I have one The Nightmen "

III. *Before the Throne*

King Ramnout sat on the Throne of Roses and stroked his heavy bifurked beard as he stared at Varkez and the stranger. Varkez felt an itching in the back of his neck, as if the executioner's ax were already resting on it. Captain Prahlen agreed the stranger's reasons were sufficient, but it was obvious Prahlen thought him a liar and Varkez a fool for believing him "But if you're so certain," said Prahlen with a scowl, "then you can have the honor of explaining to Ramnout " He had laughed then, low and nasty. "Just ask them to send back your head so I know to start looking for your replacement." Having no real option, Varkez could only salute and leave.

Now, holding the position of the formal half-bow, Varkez wondered if he had made a serious mistake Ramnout glanced at Varkez before waving a hand in release As Varkez straightened, his mind wheeled, calculating the weight of the king's expression: favorable regard? Or simple acknowledgment? Unaware of Varkez's thoughts, the king turned to the stranger, whose bow had been considerably shallower

Ramnout made a *humm humm* noise behind his beard. "There have been no sightings of the Nightmen for over a year "

"But you fear this is temporary," said the stranger "All the lands talk of the Nightmen's attacks on your city, how they swoop from the night sky on the wings of bats to lay waste behind your walls "

The king shifted on his throne "Aye," he said. "They are a pestilence.

"Long have we desired to strike back at them, but their origins remain mysterious." He gestured at a nearby gaggle of ministers in silk and pearl "There has been much disagreement among my advisers regarding their nature "

The eldest of the gaggle, an ancient with inlaid mother of-pearl bones wound through his gray beard, shuffled forward. "Indeed, Your Majesty," the graybeard said with a wheeze. "The current consensus of wisdom is that the Nightmen are nomads of the air, carried by the night breezes from realm to realm Shifting weather patterns have carried them away from us."

The stranger shook his head "That is not the case They are not spores."

The graybeard sneered. "Then from where do they originate?"

The stranger smiled. "The moon."

"Ha!" cried a second minister. "A ludicrous idea! It would be as sensible as to claim that the Nightmen are a natural phenomenon, born from the evil thoughts of men and given shape by the dew and starlight " The assembled ministers laughed, croaking like a collection of aged frogs

"Yet it is so," said the stranger.

The king did not laugh "Who are you?"

The stranger straightened To Varkez he was suddenly no longer simply a man in mud-stained clothes, but someone of tangible power "I am the wizard Qon," he said. "I was once held prisoner in their fortress before escaping I know their ways, their secrets, and most importantly, their weaknesses " Qon glanced over at the now silent ministers. "I can give you what you seek: a way to strike back at them "

The hall grew silent as the king leaned forward. His Majesty's eyes gleamed in a way that made Varkez quite nervous. "What do you need?"

IV. *Over Wine*

That night Varkez hosted the wizard at his table, watching him eat as if he had not been fed in weeks. How had this happened? Proximity, obviously. A project for the king, however unusual, needed official recognition. No one of high rank would lend their name to such a venture, lest failure hurt their position. But a princeling of the Seventh Rank, an ambitious one? Who happened to be on hand, no less. A natural choice Success would grant him advancement to the Sixth Rank, and perhaps the actual favor of Satara

Varkez shook his head But how long would this take? As Qon started on his second cooked pheasant, a second question arose. How much would it cost to feed him?

When Qon finally pushed his plate away, Varkez decided the time was right to ask a few questions The most obvious one was how.

"The secret," said Qon, "is in the proper manipulation of the four elements: fire, earth, water, and air You are familiar, no doubt, with the effects of such on compound materials?"

"Of course," said Varkez Scholar General Zim had insisted on drilling on such fundamentals. "A tree, for example, is created from the combination of these elementals. When it is cut down, the first element to die is fire. The second, water, follows soon after These two are in active opposition, and after both are removed, only earth and air remain, which oppose each other passively."

"Correct," said Qon. "Now, what happens if either of the first two elements is reintroduced to the tree?" The wizard stared at Varkez, measuring him, and Varkez's intellect responded to the challenge

"Fire reduces the wood into the primal elements. air, albeit in an impure form, revealed as smoke, and earth as ash. Water also breaks down the wood, but not as swiftly Water is slow and patient, unlike hasty fire." Varkez glanced over at Crio, who stepped over to set another opened bottle of wine on the table. The third tonight. "May I refill your goblet?"

Qon shoved the vessel forward and Varkez poured. Qon took a sip and smiled "This is good wine. Excellent flavor, and like all wine should, warms you here " He slapped his belly, then dipped a finger in his drink. "There is fire in it, but not so much that it burns you here," he said, rubbing wet fingers together "Only inside, where all men are softer The fire is weak, overwhelmed by the water " He took another sip Varkez leaned forward, waiting for the wizard's next words:

"Certain practitioners of the arts, such as myself, have devised a water that contains a much stronger essence of fire, so strong that it would burn away your flesh if it touched you."

"Impossible," said Varkez, almost automatically

"Yet it is. Power of fire constrained by patience of water. This tool allows us to go farther than before. For example, if this fiery water is applied to pure iron, it creates a form of air containing the power of fire." He smiled at Varkez's expression. "This air is purer than the impure air of our world, and easily rises above it. If we could trap enough in a container, it could lift the container into the air."

Behind him, Crio whistled in surprise. A spasm of annoyance jolted Varkez, and he made a dismissive motion to his servant. "Amazing," he said, trying to sound less impressed.

nating between holding her breath and her nose. Worst of all, the Council of the First Rank informed him his petition for advancement would be put off until the winter for further consideration.

After weeks of this, Varkez needed reassurances and finally approached Qon over more wine.

"Qon," said Varkez. "Your plan is a rather ambitious one." He paused for a long moment before the words rushed out. "How do you know we will be able to reach the moon this way?"

The wizard smiled and pulled a small object from his belt. He handed it to Varkez. "This should tell you."

It was a small scroll, densely cluttered with a cipheric shorthand, the near-illegibility of someone who has much to say but little space or time to inscribe it. "I can barely read it," he said, passing it back to Qon.

"Ah, but this air also contains within it the power of fire, and if elemental fire is brought in contact with it, the fire trapped within will escape in a violent manner. Hasty fire." The wizard rubbed a hand over a long mark on his left arm, a mark Varkez realized was a long healed burn.

"This air of fire—is this what we will use for your chariot?" The thought gave him an unsettled feeling in his stomach. Using something so dangerous seemed unwise.

Qon nodded. "We shall. But first we must create the fiery water, as well as acquire enough iron of sufficient purity. Then there is the construction of the chariot itself …" He shook his head. "It will require a great deal of work."

"You have given me much to think on," said Varkez, voice a murmur.

"He who does not learn, dies," said Qon. He drained his glass and rose. "I will retire, to let you think on it." His cloak swirled up around him as he departed.

For a long time Varkez remained, thoughts whirling. Finally he roused himself. He fumbled to refill his empty glass, only to realize Qon had taken the bottle with him.

V. The Skychariot

Things proceeded quickly from there. In the beginning Varkez had little intention of being involved. He soon realized, however, that many of the details could only be put into motion by the king's authority. With Qon performing the work, Varkez had to explain to Ramnout or, more often, whichever minister acted on his behalf. Much meant Varkez had to understand the purpose and importance of each detail.

And a thousand details there were: orders to various cattle herders through the land to collect the gut linings of the beasts they slaughtered, with proper attention to preserving the guts and where to deliver them; acquisition of several thousand yards of the purest lightweight silk to disguise the fact that the chariot would be lifted into the sky by an inflated bag of cow stomachs, hiring several seamstresses to assemble the stomachs, along with their supplies; feeding, and lodging; the collection of great weights of sulfur, iron, saltpeter; construction of the collector for capturing and storing the air-of-fire; and on, and on, and on, until Varkez thought he might go mad. Odors clung to him like the worshippers of Har-Vala. Prahlen took to calling him Lord Stinkpot, and even the few trysts he could arrange with Satara were extremely unsatisfying, due to her alter

"It is the personal account of one Anaryi," said Qon. "She claims to have been a princess of the Fourth Rank of Nucidad. According to this, she was taken prisoner by the Nightmen during the reign of King Ankas."

"Ankas reigned over seventy years ago." Varkez furrowed his brow. "Anaryi. That name does sound familiar. I believe Captain Prahlen is a grandnephew of hers, or the like. Hoists a glass to her memory on the anniversary of her disappearance. Said she was the fairest maid of the day." He snorted. "If so, the looks ended with her."

Qon unrolled the scroll. "At any rate, this tells how the Nightmen carried her away as a prisoner. Much of the document is concerned with the indignities and abuses she suffered as a concubine of one of their lords."

"The fiends!" said Varkez, almost as a formality. His distaste for Prahlen quite overwhelmed any sympathy for a woman he had never met.

"The early portions of her story are the most relevant. Listen." The wizard cleared his throat.

"'The Nightmen carried me by foot outside of the city to a place where their great skycharriots waited. I was carried on board one by two grinning knaves, along with goods from the city. In no time we were away, rising into the sky until Nucidad disappeared from sight. The Nightmen cruelly taunted me, but I ignored them as best possible.' Let's see … ah, here we are: 'After we had risen for half the day, a change occurred. The men made certain of my bonds and their cargo, then secured themselves. When I asked what was happening they said we were entering the great ethereal current between the worlds. At once the chariot bucked and shook furiously, as tho' caught in a storm. Then, below us the land began to shrink at an even more fantastic rate, until I could see the whole world at once, looking like a paint blotch. We traveled this way through the sky for a week, each day the men having their sport with me, until we reached their lair upon the moon.'" Qon closed the scroll and tossed it to Varkez. "Make the effort to read it, for to defeat your enemy you must know all that you can about him."

"Scholar-General Zim always said the same thing."

Qon grinned. "Have that manservant of yours copy it, if you like." His smile widened. "Then perhaps you'll have something to hold over Prahlen."

Varkez nodded thoughtfully.

The work continued for a few more weeks before Qon announced all was in readiness.

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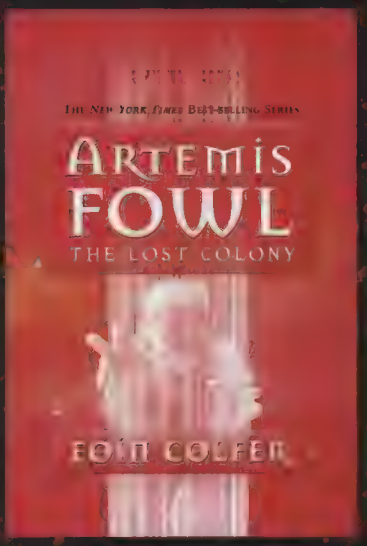

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VI. The Launch

The skychariot launched on a windless day with a slate-colored sky from the roof of the temple of the Sun Lord Aa, the only structure in the city with a large open space suitable for holding all that was required.

Varkez could see the airship as he walked outside. it stood as tall as ten men standing on each other's shoulders. "A fearsome sight," said Crio

"Mostly to me," said Varkez, "since I have to ride in it. I'm gambling a lot on this wizard, but at least my wine cellar will be spared further damage Here." He passed Crio a heavy scroll case sealed with his mark "I've filed a copy of this at the Hall of the Nine Princedoms, but I thought you might want your own copy. I've named you my official heir, if I don't return after a year and a day. There's not much to my household, but holding it will give you the Ninth Rank "

Crio took it, silent for a moment, before saying, "Thank you, sir " He kept quiet until they arrived at the temple, then made a scene by hugging Varkez before his troops· ten guardsmen brave and true, volunteers and commoners as well, promised noble rank if they returned heroes. That Crio would gain the same if they failed in disgrace crossed Varkez's mind as well. Pushing Crio away, Varkez turned to a grinning Alondro, who had pinned overcoming his romantic obstacles by volunteering. No one objected when noble cousins married. "Let's go," Varkez said.

The skychariot's deck was small but functional. an open space of fire-hardened oak, with a railing waist high. There was another deck underneath for storage and some protection from the elements. As the men loaded the supplies (including a half-ton of dried beef, hard cheese, and harder bread and a giant cask of water), Varkez turned to greet the king and the Council of the First Rank Varkez bowed often and encouraging pleasantries were exchanged, but throughout he felt Ramnout's eyes fixed on him They said, 'After all this, you had best succeed ' But the Council's eyes said, 'There's no way you can fail us, because we're not expecting you to succeed.' Sweat pooled at the small of Varkez's back.

As the loading finished, Qon appeared in his traveling clothes, standing out among the nobles in silk and soldiers in chain, a solitary figure in stained cloth

"Expect our return in a few weeks," Qon said, after the barest nod to the king. "Let us depart." With that, they all trooped onboard.

Varkez tightened his jaw as he stood at the railing by Qon. "Hold on," said the wizard, as four men stepped forward with heavy axes. As one they severed the lines holding the skychariot to the temple roof. Then they were free, rising into the air at what seemed to Varkez to be an alarming speed He almost pitched to the deck before grabbing the rail.

The skychariot soared higher and higher The soldiers now resembled a herd of children, chattering with excitement How small the city now looked, how the horizon receded, at the flight of a flock of birds nearby. Varkez took a deep breath The clean air tasted good.

Qon turned and regarded them all. "Get some rest," he said. "It will be five or six hours before we reach the entrance to the ethereal current."

One by one the soldiers began to settle in The older ones pulled their helmets over their eyes and fell asleep almost immediately The younger ones tried to imitate them but kept chattering among themselves

Varkez looked over at Qon "It may seem a little late to ask, but how do you steer this thing?"

"Normally we would drift with the wind," said Qon He pitched his voice low. "But I am a wizard, after all. I will provide some guidance from time to time, as necessary." He clapped Varkez on the shoulder. "As I said, get some rest This will be a long journey "

Varkez nodded and went to find a clear spot

VII. Into the Night

Varkez awoke. The sky had darkened from slate to coal, with glittering stars set in it. Distant thunderclouds gleamed in the moonlight, heavenly mountains on the move. Beside him on the deck Alondro mumbled in his sleep Varkez thought he caught a few words about the unattainable Eyra.

Varkez watched his breath cloud in front of him, copies of the distant thunderclouds in miniature The thought of celestial giants, living amongst them, unseen and unknown to man, occurred to him Varkez smiled at his notion At that moment Alondro began to snore into his helmet

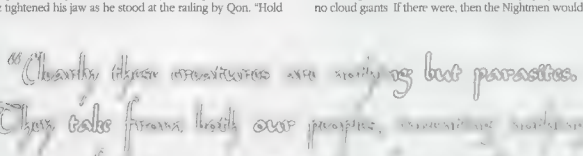
Carefully Varkez stood The other men lay scattered about, huddled in groups for warmth against the thin air. He picked his way clear toward Qon on the other side of the deck The wizard gave no sign at his approach, only stared into the night

Varkez stopped beside him and looked out over the edge Past the railing, far far below some few clusters of lights winked up at him like reverse stars In some spots they traced the familiar line of the tattered old maps on the wall of the Scholar-General's office, before dissolving into darkness.

"Did you sleep well?" Qon said, still staring up Varkez grunted and jerked a thumb back toward Alondro Although Qon did not turn to look, he nodded. "Alondro I can hear his love sighs from here "

"They could awake the cloud giants." Varkez said. Qon turned to regard him Varkez described his whimsy turned theory. When he finished Qon stroked his beard and looked back up at the sky

"It is a good idea," he said before looking up again. "But there are no cloud giants If there were, then the Nightmen would not be able


"Earth's true inhabitants are nothing but parasites.
They take from both our people, draining us
of their own and stealing from us"

and another. Varkez opened his mouth when Qon shook his head "Wait. See."

Along one edge of the vast surface of silk above them a sliver of light began to show, highlighting the edge of the great airship in bold relief. The light grew and grew, forming from a sliver to a crescent. Qon smiled again, wide in the silvery light. The light came from the moon, larger than Varkez had ever seen before.

"Behold," Qon said, then pointed. Staring, Varkez thought he could make out what appeared to be a silvery ribbon stretching up toward the moon before vanishing in its glow. The ribbon grew larger and larger. Varkez gasped a little when he realized they were approaching the trailing end of what was the ethereal current.

Qon turned to Varkez. Silver light gleamed in his eyes. "Wake the men. The transition might be a bit rough."

VIII. To the Moon

Varkez began barking orders, unleashing an organized chaos. Loose equipment was tossed below deck to take its chances with the rest of the supplies. As they finished, each man knelt on the deck and threaded his arms through the rails, holding on like a priest of Ptaag to a signed distribution contract.

The stillness stretched for one minute, two, three.

Then the skychariot jumped in the air as if struck with a hammer. Varkez clenched his teeth, trying not to vomit as his insides rolled within him. A scream pierced the air as Derlosh, a young guard with pale blond hair, lost his grip and was flung over the rail. Beside him Alondro began muttering prayers to a half-dozen gods and goddesses of mercy, protection, and luck.

A support line holding the deck to the gasbag snapped, a thunderclap over the commotion. Beneath him Varkez could hear crashing from below decks and Alondro, now shouting.

Then they were through it. For a moment no one moved, fearing it might start again if they relaxed. Then Qon said, "We have made it." A ragged cheer broke out. Varkez found himself near to weeping in relief.

He wiped at his face and pulled himself up to look over the railing. As he watched, he thought he could see the earth visibly receding. After a moment he remembered Derlosh, but could not see the guardsman falling below.

"I cannot see him," said Alondro.

"Nor I." Varkez sighed and turned to address everyone. "All right, we have much to do! A couple of you get below and see what survived that shaking! I need someone to replace that support line, and the rest of you to start rigging up a restraint system. We're going to need a more secure method than just 'hold on.'" This last was addressed to Qon. The wizard bowed his head but said nothing.

Days passed as they sailed along the bridge of the night. For fear of igniting the skychariot's fuel, there could be no hot meals or pleasant fires, only cold hours of beauty and boredom. The men spent the hours in doing for their possessions. At one point Alondro owned all their mailshirts before losing them back one by one.

Varkez spent a few hours questioning Qon on the nature of their travel, but soon found himself overwhelmed by what he learned: the earth he thought so still beneath him actually wandered the heavens. The concept was not unfamiliar; Scholar-General Zim had long drilled him on the names of the heavenly wanderers, but had always implied they were divine creatures, servants of the gods fulfilling various tasks. That Zim could be so wrong shook him a little, although he had never quite believed all Zim had taught.

Worse, the wanderers Varkez saw stalking across the night sky were, in fact, other worlds like his own. The idea was startling. Each world might have people of its own, living and loving and dying, for the worlds were connected by these ethereal currents. The heavenly bridges bound them together like silver spider webs, allowing travel between them by man, gods, or worse. The Nightmen might plague all the worlds, not theirs alone. *But we are striking back,* Varkez said to himself.

IX. Over the Dead Lands

As the moon grew larger and larger in the sky, Varkez and his men spent more and more time watching it, studying it like an adversary. Soon features revealed themselves: vast mountain chains, dark pooling of lava flows, and long dusty plains. Only Qon appeared uninterested. He spent the approach inscribing sigils of luck or strength or safety on the insides of the men's helmets. Varkez's was for accuracy, a curling tri-cornered glyph that tingled when he ran his fingers over it.

The exit from the current was much gentler than their entrance, the skychariot receiving only one good shake. This time they had tied themselves to the rail to prevent accidents. Soon the skychariot approached the moon's surface. The men sat, waiting, fingers on crossbow triggers in case a Nightman skychariot appeared from behind a ragged mountain. But all they saw was wasteland.

"For something that looks so beautiful from a distance," said Varkez, "I find myself disappointed to see it up close."

A thin smile grazed Qon's face. "Its beauty is hidden, but there. Held to a different standard, perhaps." The wizard stood and pulled up the hood on his cloak. "Now I must concentrate, so that we may find the way to their citadel." With that, he bowed his head and leaned upon his staff.

They whisked over the dead lands below them. Above them the moon's sky was black, but no stars could be seen. Only the blue-green eye of the earth staring back. For hours they flew. The men took turns on watch, resting when they could, but Qon still leaned upon his staff.

Finally the wizard gave a hiss. Varkez raised his head as they crested a broken ridge. Beyond, squatting beneath a mountain, was a city built of gray stone. "The city of the Nightmen," said Varkez.

"Yes," said Qon, pointing. "There is where we shall attack."

Their skychariot moved closer. Along one edge of the city they could make out several domes clustered together, dark gigantic mushrooms dwarfing the nearby buildings. Skychariots of considerable size. Even from this distance Varkez could see they were much larger than their own.

"The Nightmen use those in the attacks. Their gliders swoop down to attack behind Nucidad's walls and land other skychariots outside to carry away their troops, now laden with loot." Qon smiled. "But they can be extremely vulnerable, as we shall soon demonstrate."

"What did you have in mind?" said Alondro.

Qon hesitated. "I will need a volunteer. Bold, daring, a good shot with a crossbow, and not afraid of heights."

Varkez stepped forward.

X. The Attack

Varkez hung from the bottom of the rope. No armor, no sword, just his helmet and a crossbow banging against his knee.

Alondro tied the loop with a hangman's knot. "I had always thought you were born to hang," he said, and everyone laughed, even Varkez.

Beneath him lay the city. He clenched the crossbow quarrel between his teeth and opened the pouch Qon had handed him.

The rope had cut into his buttocks as the men let it out, lowering him out into space. "We can't take a chance shooting from the deck. Any stray sparks would doom us," Qon murmured.

"I just won't look down," said Varkez.

A whiff of rotten eggs, long familiar from the weeks of laboring for Qon, wafted up to him. Inside the pouch was a long coil of cotton threads. Carefully he took it out.

"How does this work?"

"Thus," Qon tapped the end of the quarrel, "is phosphorus." The metal head had been replaced by tightly bound cloth, smeared with a reddish wax. He pointed at the cotton. "Thus is sulfur. They are servants of fire. Rub the cotton against the quarrel to summon it. Just don't drop the quarrel."

Varkez twisted the cotton against the quarrel. There was a sudden puff as the quarrel's tip burst into flame. Heat licked at his fingertips. On instinct Varkez dropped the cotton, but managed to keep hold of the quarrel.

For a moment he struggled with holding the burning quarrel, pulling up the crossbow, and keeping from falling. Finally things came together and Varkez loaded the quarrel in place, muttering thanks he had remembered to wind the crossbow before being lowered. The end of the crossbow began to smolder. He ignored it and took aim at the closest skychariot.

He paused to mutter a quick prayer, or a dedication to Satara, or something. Nothing came to him. So he pulled the trigger.

The quarrel arced into the darkness below, leaving a fiery trail behind it. It vanished, and for an instant Varkez feared nothing had happened.

Then the skychariot disappeared, replaced by an expanding ball of flame, a fiery flower roaring beneath him. In a moment it spread to another chariot, and another, and another. Sound and heat battered at Varkez, and he looked up. Above him he saw the faces of the others, looking down with their mouths wide open, their faces glowing from the fires below. An instant later a piece of debris flew past his head and parted the rope.

And then he fell.

XI. Inside the Citadel

The landing was less one big impact than a series of blows, each one smashing into a different part of his anatomy. He had just a moment to register it before he went on to the next one. The final landing, however, was much softer than he expected.

For a long time Varkez lay still, trying not to move. Once, while still a Ninth Rank, he had angered a Third Rank prince at school by not giving up his dessert fast enough at the evening meal. The next day, after studies in the Scholar General's office, a small gang of the prince's toadies cornered him and beat him efficiently with flails. No bones broken, no blood spilled, but every inch of him felt it.

This hurt several times more than that.

He remembered where he was, however, and realized he had to get up. The Nightmen would be quite angry at what he had done and would be happy to demonstrate that anger.

Varkez rolled over onto his knees, feeling them scream as he moved, then looked around. He knelt on a wide balcony of flat stone, not far from the railing. Small bits of slate clung to him. He envisioned himself hitting the steep roof at an angle, bouncing down it to land here.

He shifted, feeling something under him. He looked down. To his surprise, he lay on a dead man, whose blank eyes stared up at the sky with a surprised look. A Nightman, no doubt. He looked like most dead men Varkez had seen, although this was the first one he had killed by falling on him.

"What's happening?" A door, the only one on the balcony, stood open and the voice came from inside. A man's voice, annoyed. "Carge, answer me!"

Varkez looked over the rail. Too far to jump, and best not to tempt luck a second time. His only chance was that the person inside would not be expecting him but the dead man, Carge. After all, how often did people fall out of the air?

The realization that this was precisely what the Nightmen did gave him pause. Still, he had little choice. His crossbow had long disappeared, but the Nightman had a dagger in his sash. Varkez drew it and slipped inside.

He found himself in a richly appointed chamber. Near the center of the chamber, to Varkez's surprise, was a young woman partially dressed, standing on a low platform. A chain led from an iron collar around her neck to the center of the platform, keeping her from leaving it. Before her stood another Nightman in a dark brocade tunic, wielding a barbed whip. Two more women stood chained against the far wall.

"Carge," said the man, not turning around. "What is happening out there? It's difficult to concentrate on her squirming with all that noise."

Varkez said nothing, only headed toward the man, trying to walk naturally. The woman on the platform locked eyes with him, and he prayed she wouldn't react. She didn't. But one of the others gasped, and the Nightman turned around to face him.

Varkez charged, hoping for the best.

The fight may have gone differently in other circumstances. If Varkez hadn't fallen a few minutes before from the skychariot to bounce down a roof onto a balcony. If he had had his sword rather than an unfamiliar dagger. If he had not left his chainmail shirt on the skychariot, nor lost his helmet bouncing down the roof. And if the Nightman hadn't been wielding a barbed whip with great skill and greater reach.

It ended quickly. The Nightman danced away out of Varkez's reach, then lashed out.

The weighted barbs cut across his knife arm, pulling him off balance. Stumbling like a drunkard, Varkez fell across the dancing plat form, landing at the woman's feet. His hand smacked open on impact, releasing the dagger.

Before it could roll away the woman scooped it up. Then, with that motion flowing into the next she threw it. Varkez looked back to see the Nightman stagger, clawing at the hilt protruding from his throat. With a gurgle he collapsed.

Stunned, Varkez looked up at the woman. She pointed at the body, her bare arm showing old scars and fresh blood. In a curious accent she said, "The pig should have the key to this chain around his neck." He could only stare. She smiled, showing bright wide teeth. "I am Madrea, stranger, and you have my thanks."

XII. Madrea

She was, without a doubt, the most fascinating creature Varkez had ever seen. After he had dug the key free and released her, she had whirled into action. In moments the other women were free, all of them searching the room for anything useful. A pile on the bed soon grew: clothing for the three women, medical supplies, various pieces of ornate but sturdy armor, and a large collection of knives and swords.

When they finished, Madrea identified the two women as her maids, Solea and Elbetha. Solea was the one who had gasped at Varkez's appearance. In moments Madrea subjected her to a scolding torrent, the language leaving Varkez breathless and the maid shame-faced. Madrea then set the two of them to hiding the dead man and mopping up the blood. "Just in case," Madrea said. Then, as she cleaned the wounds on his arm, she told their story.

Madrea stated she was a princess. While out one day riding in the hills the Nightmen had descended upon the three and captured them. After a considerable journey, the Nightmen had returned to their citadel with the women as their slaves. Their current treatment was part of their owner's attempt to teach the importance of submission. The lessons had not been going well, however. Somehow Varkez was not surprised.

When she finished, Madrea looked to him. Quickly he spoke of Qon and the skychariot and their mission to strike back at the Nightmen. When he told her of the fiery destruction of the Nightmen's own skychariots, her eyes grew wide. Then she smiled. It was not a particularly nice smile.

"This may be what I have hoped for," she said. "With the city in turmoil, it will be the best chance for the slaves to rise up. We must try to help them."

"Agreed," said Varkez. He selected a decently balanced sword covered with filigree and, in lieu of armor, strapped a small buckler to his shield arm. "The slaves will need weapons," he said, and pointed at the remaining pile of swords.

Madrea nodded, then gestured to Solea and Elbetha.

Quickly the two maids wrapped the weapons in cloth, bundling

them well to keep them silent Then they each secreted a dagger beneath their skirts "Spread the word to the other slaves," said Madrea "Start with Haldren in the kitchens, and tell him to rouse the other warriors of Arnese." The two maids nodded and slipped out the door.

XIII. *"A Words Like Your Own"*

"Arnese?" said Varkez It was the name of one of the wanderers in the sky, dark red and most often appearing in the southern skies at dawn Qon's lecture on their true nature came back to him "You come from Arnese? I come from earth, the blue world in the near sky."

Madrea nodded "It is a world like your own," she said.

"So Qon was right But if you are from another world," said Varkez, "how is it that we can understand each other?"

Madrea smiled "I am speaking the language used by the Night men. I have been their prisoner for many months, and while I would never submit to their will, much can be learned if you can understand your enemy " She spat "Clearly these creatures are nothing but parasites. They take from both our peoples, inventing nothing of their own and stealing from us That they would steal your language as well does not surprise me "

Varkez frowned. "Do your people know the secret of the sky-chariots? Of the air of fire?"

Madrea shook her head. "No There have been questions among my people about the Nightmen's method of travel, but it remains a mystery "

"To my people as well," said Varkez "Qon claimed he had been a prisoner So how would he have learned it?" Possibilities began to align as he considered, and a sudden nervousness gripped him. "We must leave I need to find my men as soon as possible "

"I agree," said Madrea

They crept out, Madrea leading the way. Every fiber in Varkez tingled as they prowled down the empty hallways. The great wealth so casually displayed caught his eye Rich tapestries covered the walls, and statues wrought from gold and jade stood in between But they saw no one living

"We are in the royal chambers of the Nightmen," Madrea said. "Strange that it is so quiet Usually the royal guard patrols here You must have come with a considerable army to have drawn them all away like this."

Varkez shook his head. "It was a small party by any standard My men are volunteers all. Good men with blades, but not celebrated warriors. I had hoped they would avoid landing."

"If they were damaged in your attack, they might have had little choice " Madrea paused at the top of a marble staircase. "Do you hear that?"

"I do," said Varkez From downstairs came the sound of distant shouts and clashing metal "Where does this lead?"

"Below us are the quarters of the lesser nobles, and the bottom is the great hall."

"Is it possible your maids might've stirred things up already?"

Madrea shook her head "It seems too soon. The kitchens and slave quarters are underground Some of the more fractious might've acted on their own, of course." She gave a crooked smile "Many of my people are of that sort."

"I have no doubt Then it is likely my men Come, they will need all the help they can get!"

Down the stairs they went, as swift as caution would allow, Varkez in the lead. They paused halfway above the next landing a quartet of Nightmen guards faced downstairs, weapons at the ready Behind them in the hall stood a cluster of lesser nobles, chattering to one another

Madrea lifted her dagger In her eyes Varkez could see what he felt He smiled and nodded

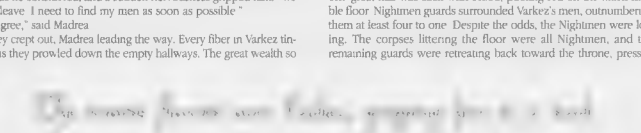
Together they rushed down the stairs. One of the nobles saw them and screamed, but Varkez was already there. His sword sliced open the neck of one guard as Madrea threw a dagger into the eye of another The nobles fled screaming as Varkez raised his sword Madrea stood beside him, dagger ready Despite the remaining guards advantage of armor, they seemed too terrified to fight well Varkez quickly brought one down with a heavy cut to the thigh The last threw down his sword and fled

"Not quite what I was expecting," said Varkez. Red splotches covered his bandage, but a quick check showed it seemed to be from his opponents Madrea retrieved her dagger From beneath them came the din of a full-scale battle, echoing on the stairs Varkez nodded. "Come!"

They dashed down the staircase into a slaughterhouse

XIV. *In the Great Hall*

The great hall was slick with blood, pooling red on the black marble floor Nightmen guards surrounded Varkez's men, outnumbering them at least four to one Despite the odds, the Nightmen were losing. The corpses littering the floor were all Nightmen, and the remaining guards were retreating back toward the throne, pressed



back by the warriors of Nucidad In their center walked Qon, hooded, striding toward the throne.

Madrea hissed and pointed Varkez looked to see Febru, a recent recruit with only fair skill at swordsmanship, trading blows with three Nightmen As Febru beat through the guard of one Nightman, another stabbed him through a gap in his mail, dealing Febru a fearsome wound Instead of collapsing, however, Febru brought down his immediate foe with a quick thrust before turning to the others Blood rushed down his side, but Febru never slowed.

"Your men fight like fiends," said Madrea.

Varkez blinked. The memory of Qon sitting on the deck of the sky-chariot swam before him. Qon inscribing what he claimed were protective spells on every man's helmet Qon, now leading his men into a bloodbath "More like men possessed," he said, and a fierce rage began in him.

Qon held up his staff and the Nucidad warriors halted their advance. No longer pressed, the surviving Nightmen hastily surrounded the throne and a small cluster of noblemen in front of it

"Qolchim," shouted Qon, the sound echoing in the hall. "I have come for you."

From among the nobles a man in a dark red tunic stepped forward. He bore no sign of rank save a heavy gold pendant around his neck. His hair was gray with age, but in one hand he held up a heavy double bladed axe. His face looked familiar to Varkez.

"Who are you?" said Qolchim. His voice was strong, unshaken.

"The rightful heir," said Qon, and threw back his hood. A gasp rose from the Nightmen. Qon and Qolchim's faces were variations on a theme.

Qolchim narrowed his eyes. "So the escapee has returned. I should have poisoned you, brother, while you lay in your cell." He raised his axe and gave a fierce grin. "I think your demons will face a difficult task fighting with their legs hacked off."

Qon smiled. "I have learned much in my years of wandering. I do not need my men to defeat you. Just to get me close enough."

He raised his staff up and shouted out dark words that slithered away from comprehension. When he finished, Qolchim staggered and fell. His axe clattered across the floor. Qon stepped forward and turned over the body. With evident satisfaction he spat once in the dead man's darkened face.

He then took the pendant from the body and straightened, placing it around his neck. "By the blood of my father, the Warlord Logonn, I, Qondrasm, claim the throne of the Moon." His eyes swept the surviving nobles, who shrank back. "As your new warlord, I would advise acknowledging my rule."

One of the nobles stepped forward. "Gladly we shall acknowledge you, o mighty Qondrasm. But your fearsomeness should know Qolchim has an heir. A son, Yolgrim."

Varkez descended the stairs to the floor. The rage within him grew with each step. "Would this Yolgrim be fond of whips?" he cried out. All turned toward him.

XV. Lord Qon

"Varkez," said Qon, sounding a little surprised. "You survived your fall, I'm pleased to see."

Varkez stopped beside his men. No sign of recognition shone in their eyes. "Even without my helmet?" He reached out and snatched away Febru's helmet. Released from its influence, the young guard collapsed, now only a twitching corpse. "You have slain my men," he said.

Qon smiled. "On the contrary," he said, "I kept them alive. There was no chance they could have survived otherwise, outnumbered as we were."

"Can you cure them of their wounds? Restore their blood, their lives?" Qon did not reply, and Varkez snarled at him. "You did not have to land the skycharior. A frontal attack was purest folly!"

"Then how could I have regained the throne? Without the throne, I would never have returned. That was the whole point," he snorted. "Otherwise your king would never have agreed to help." Qon looked down at the dead Qolchim. "But there are still details to attend to. Who is this whiphandler you speak of?" The wizard looked past Varkez to Madrea, who had joined him. His eyes lingered over her scars. "Is this some of his work? Yolgrim, my *nephew*?" The emphasis on the word held only contempt.

The noble nodded. "Yes, your lordship."

"He is dead, then," said Varkez. "A dagger in the throat, and he had no enchanted helmet to preserve him."

"Excellent!" said Qon. "Then my throne is secure." He turned back toward the throne, guards and nobles alike retreating before him. With a slight sigh he settled onto it, running his fingers up and down the jewel-covered arms. Varkez looked away, and Qon laughed. "To show my gratitude, I release your men. They have served me well, but you seem to think it cruel to hold them in this fashion."

With that Qon muttered more dark words. As one the warriors of Nucidad collapsed, Varkez ran to them, but he could tell it was too late for most of them. Only three, Alondro, Tens, and Predrin, still breathed. Despair gripping him, Varkez yanked the cursed helmets from their heads to hurl them across the hall. Then he glared back at up Qon, who smiled.

"Oh, don't look so grumpy, little princeling." He leaned back on his throne, running his fingers across the pendant around his neck. "You have done what your precious little earthlords wanted. The depradations of the 'Nightmen' have come to an end, at least for a time."

"For a time?" said Varkez.

"It will take some time to rebuild the fleet. A great loss, to be true, but a necessary price to unbalance Qolchim. Besides, it will allow your king to relax, to think you might've succeeded. They will build new wealth and grow lax in guarding it." He laughed again. "Let the fields of Earth go fallow, before harvesting from them again."

With a curse Varkez drew his sword. "You will betray my king." Before he could take two steps the Nightmen guards, anxious to curry favor with their new lord, surrounded him.

"My dear Varkez," said Qon, "certain members of your council of princes support me in this. They plan to use the Nightmen's return to overthrow your king. Each hopes to replace him, no doubt. As if the wolf cares who leads the sheep." Qon shook his head. "You are no different. A prince although one so common as to make the title valueless. Now you will be a slave."

Varkez raised up his sword, watching the guards shift, ready for him.

Then from behind him came a loud roar. Varkez looked over his shoulder to see a small door, almost hidden behind a pillar, fly open. From it poured a wave of men and women in rags, iron collars around their necks and weapons in their hands.

As the guards turned to face this new enemy, Varkez slipped away. Six long strides would bring Qon in range of his sword.

He had taken three when Qon's eyes snapped back to him.

Another one and the wizard began muttering, shaping a spell.

The words flowed over Varkez, gripping him in a dark hand, forcing a scream from his throat. He took another step, the movement agonizing, the pain tearing out his soul. He must, he must. In desperation he lunged at Qon, sword aimed for the wizard's heart as the darkness overwhelmed him.

XVI. After

Varkez awoke with a gasp, still feeling the tendrils of magic coiled around him. He began clawing at his flesh, trying frantically to free himself. A moment later warm hands held his, soft words whispered in his ear. Perfume filled his nose, driving away the memory of Qon's last spell. Soft blankets clung to him, not Qon's geas. Scars covered the arms that held him, and he knew then it was Madrea.

"Is it over?" he managed.

"It is," she said. The sound of her voice was music, the words, poetry. "Qon died on the throne, your sword through his heart. The slaves have overthrown the Nightmen. Your people and mine are safe."

He sagged in relief, feeling every inch of her warmth against his skin. "What of my men?"

She sighed. "Two of them, their wounds were too great. The last, Alondro I think, he survives. Elbetha and Solea are caring for him. They seem quite taken with him."

Varkez managed to smile. "If they can distract him once and for all from Eyra-on-the-pedestal, they will have my gratitude."

"And you have mine," she said. "You are a brave man, and without you and your people I would still be in chains." He turned to look at her face, before so resolute, now almost girlish. "Now that I am free, my duty is to return to my people as soon as possible. Your skychanot could make the journey, from what I have heard. If you would take me, I mean, take me home, I would be..." Her voice trailed off.

Varkez thought of his maneuverings over the months, struggles for promotion and recognition from the Council, the king, and Satara. He pushed it all away. "Of course," he said. ❧

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My eyes are open; I'm awake. Then I remember, and my brief peaceful moment yields to full awareness. The morning takes on the familiar hue of reluctant gray. I close my eyes, willing my body back to sleep.

But already my phantoms are stirring, sliding out of my bed, ghostly bare toes feeling around for ghostly slippers. Some of them are shuffling toward the bedroom door, moving like old ladies trapped in young bodies. As they vanish through solid wood, I feel that familiar pull, the need to be near them.

It gains in strength until I can feel it as a dull ache behind my eyes. Beside me Gil's ghost sleeps on. At length, I don my own furry slippers and follow my phantoms.

Together we make our way down the hall, like a parade of sleepy-eyed, pajama clad identical twins. Coffee's earthy aroma finds us near the kitchen. I blink in mild surprise when at my kitchen table I find someone unlike us, separate but similar, with the same chestnut hair and light eyes. Helen. Dressed for work, and drinking coffee.

What are you doing here?" I ask, but with one glance at her I already know. I turn to the coffee maker where a number of my phantoms are busy at work, brewing dozens of pots of yesterday's coffee from mornings long gone. They move from the brewer to the sink and back again, their translucent bodies forming one extended tunnel version of me. But Helen has already brewed a pot. My phantoms grow less distinct. She has disrupted the routines, my routines.

And that is why she's here. I gaze at her, aware of my sweatpants and dishevel hair in the face of her ironed blouse and manicured nails. She sips her coffee and asks, "Why do you make coffee when you don't even drink it?" But I'm too tired to answer her. I keep my eyes down as Gil's ghost helps himself to coffee from another time.

Nance," she says softly, as to a friend, as to a sister, and she's here as a friend and sister both. But I already feel the pull again, the need to follow, and I watch as my phantoms head for the front door.

She opens her mouth, but I hold up a hand. "One minute. I need to get the paper." And I fight the urge just long enough to note her pregnant pause, her reluctant nod. Then I follow my phantoms out the door.

Outside, the day is bright, but to me it's just a lighter shade of gray. I follow my phantoms to the plastic-wrapped, dew-covered newspaper on my front lawn. All those papers, all those headlines. I try without success to recall yesterday's news. A stray thought informs me that my slippers are wet.

Then we're back inside, and here my phantoms grow hazy, indistinct, as they choose different routes. Some return to the kitchen, to open the fridge or sit at the table-some head for the bathroom, still others move toward the bedroom, different choices made on different days. The urge to follow them wanes, the pain lessens. With a sigh I return to the kitchen, pour myself a glass of orange juice, and sit down at the table across from Helen. One of my phantoms is sitting to her right, Gil's ghost drinks coffee to her left. Instead of watching them I stare at Helen's nails. They're painted a dark apple red. I like them. I could never wear a color so daring.

"Nancy," Helen says, her tone more firm. "Do I have to remind you again about the scarring of time?"

I wave the question away. "Yes, I know: 'A routine wears ruts into the fabric of time like a river wears ruts into the fabric of the earth. Time is less elastic than it used to be. If I don't behave myself I'll get stuck in my own rut. Did I about cover it?"

"I can see them," she says quietly, her eyes on the lazy phantom to her right, "and that means you're already stuck in a rut. That's not good, Nance." She doesn't seem to notice Gil's ghost. My phantom is gazing at him.

I take a sudden interest in the orange juice pulp sticking to the inside of my glass. "Do you remember how angry Dad would get if we interfered with his morning routines? It was always coffee and paper, shave, shower, get dressed, and *then* he'd be ready for the rest of it. If he wasn't already dead, this time problem would've killed him for sure. I smiled. "Imagine Dad trying to change his habits."

"We're not talking about him. We're talking about you." Helen tries to take my hand, but I move away. We both watch my phantom rise and wander back to the bedroom. The pull intensifies, grows into pain behind my eyes. Gil's ghost is still with us. I rub at my eyes, suddenly exhausted.

Helen sighs. "I know how hard it's been for you, ever since Gil passed."

Don't," I tell her, and my vision seam-white with another kind of pain. *Don't bring that up, don't go there, far too much pain still, not something I can talk about right now, maybe not ever.* I stare at my glass until I can see again. "I take comfort in my routines," I say at length. "They keep me going."

"You've become a slave to them. And they can kill you."

So *can the pain of memories*, I want to tell her, but instead I say, "They're all I have now." Gil's ghost wanders away, toward the living room.

You have so much more than that," she says and I'm annoyed at her, because I know where this is going. "You need to get out of the house, Nancy. It's been a long time, too long. Why don't you come with me to the flea market on Saturday? I miss bargain hunting with you."

Now is not a good time, Helen."

"Now is all we have, Nance. The first step is always the hardest one to take. I promise it gets easier after that."

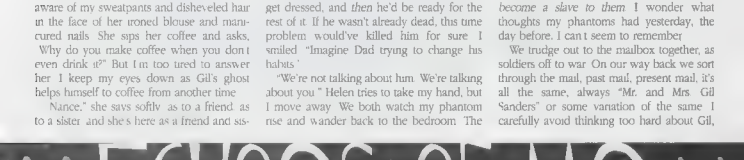
"And you're an expert at moving on, aren't you, Helen? When Dad died, you filled your life with so many distractions you barely had time to mourn him. Do you even think about him anymore, with the busy life you lead?"

My words follow her all the way to the front door. She turns back to me, and I can see the hurt and anger flashing in her eyes. "That's how people get past death, Nancy, they keep on living. I was just trying to help you."

She slams the door behind her. A selfish part of me feels better.

The day comes and goes as always, and I have my phantoms to keep me company. Together we wander around the house, cleaning, cooking, napping. Inconsequential things. Routines. Sometimes we encounter Gil's ghost. My phantoms talk to him, I talk to him, but he doesn't seem to notice. I try not to think about what Helen said: *You've become a slave to them.* I wonder what thoughts my phantoms had yesterday, the day before. I can't seem to remember.

We trudge out to the mailbox together, as soldiers off to war. On our way back we sort through the mail, past mail, present mail, it's all the same, always "Mr. and Mrs. Gil Sanders" or some variation of the same. I carefully avoid thinking too hard about Gil,



too much pain there. *That's how people get past death. Nancy, they keep on living.*

The gray day fades into gray twilight, and then on into grayest night. We tuck ourselves into bed and spend another troubled night passing in and out of sleep. My disjointed dreams feel like aching bones.

Awake again. I stare up into darkness. My bed is crowded with my phantoms, but I am alone. My hand reaches out to find cold, empty sheets beside me. I imagine phantom hands reaching out, over and over again. I

imagine his ghost, sleeping beside me. But I am alone.

Sometime during the night my phantoms all rise together. The pain of the pull is sharp and immediate, and I hasten to catch up to them to lessen the pain, to avoid worse pain. I follow the phantom parade out to the kitchen, where dozens of them are finding glasses, pouring water, sitting at the table, heads in hands, staring at nothing. Doing nothing. As I stand in the kitchen and consider the echoes of me, I begin to see the truth in Helen's words.

"I'm not really living," I tell my phantoms. But they can't hear me. They're echoes of the past, stuck forever in the trivial routines that have become my captors.

With a great deal of difficulty and considerable pain I make my way across the kitchen to the phone on the wall. My sleepy sister answers on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Helen, I need your help."

"I'll be right over."

Helen arrives as my phantoms wander into the living room and turn on the TV. I follow them, gathering my strength. She sits down next to me on the faded corduroy couch.

"It will be painful," she says. "But it's time. Are you ready?"

I nod. She takes my hand.

One at a time and in small groups, my phantoms wander to the sliding glass door and out to the backyard, to the little river behind the house. The pull strengthens, the need to follow, and I feel sick to my stomach. There's some pain, but I'm far more afraid of what will come.

My sister watches them go. She frowns. "Where are they going? It's the middle of the night. What do you do outside at two in the morning?" she asks me. The pain is increasing, spreading out from behind my eyes to the base of my skull. I begin to tremble.

And now the echoes of me are gathering at the riverbank. They stand and gaze across the moonlit water. One by one, they start to move in a slow, gliding walk.

Helen regards me sadly even as she holds my arm to prevent me from joining them. "Oh, Nancy," she says. "I know how much you miss him."

I realize that she can't see Gil's ghost out there on the riverbank, waiting for me to come and dance with him, as the echoes of me dance with the memory of him, over and over, night after night. And then I wonder if his ghost was ever truly there at all, or if I imagined him to keep me company during the loneliest hours of my life.

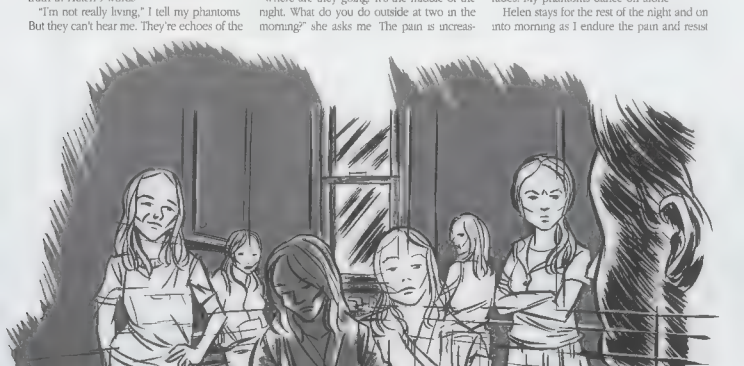
"I'm sorry, Gil," I whisper. "I can't dance with you tonight."

And with those words I embrace the pain all of it: the pain of loss, the pain of breaking with the past in order to move into the present, the pain of change. Gil's ghost fades. My phantoms dance on alone.

Helen stays for the rest of the night and on into morning as I endure the pain and resist the echoes of me, of the old me. Gil's ghost never returns.

Later in the day, the remnants of my phantoms check the mail and I walk out with them. My phantoms don't look at me, nor do they say goodbye, as they turn back to the house and I remain standing by the mailbox, alone.

And then I take that first step past the mailbox, and then another, and on down the street, toward what becomes my first afternoon walk in a very long time. ✍



BY MICHELLE THUMA — ILLUSTRATION BY CHI-YUN LAU

DRAGGING THE PAST BEHIND YOU CAN MAKE IT DIFFICULT TO SEE THE PRESENT, AND IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE THE FUTURE.

Of Swords & Horses

BY CARRIE VAUGHN

ILLUSTRATION BY ZELA LOBB

We all want our children to follow their destinies and
have their success come true. But would we be so eager
if we knew what the true cost to us would be?

I raised my daughter on Disney princess movies because I'd loved them so much as a girl: the music, the happily ever afters, and those amazing dresses. They made me dream of other worlds and I'd wondered what it would be like to dance at a ball, to marry a prince, to live in a world with magic.

Maybe I thought that Maggie would turn into me, or something like me. I'd have a friend I could sigh over the movies with, a little girl I could dress in satin princess gowns.

But Maggie's questions startled me.

"How come the girls don't get to ride horses and have swords and things?

Then, I showed her *Mulan*, in which the girl rides a horse and has a sword, and my six-year-old astutely observed, "But she's dressed like a boy."

So I signed her up for fencing lessons.

I read an article in the paper about the local fencing school where one of the students—a girl—had just won a medal in the world championships and a scholarship to Harvard. Who knew Harvard offered fencing scholarships? The school advertised that their classes boosted confidence and increased poise and self-esteem—especially for girls.

Maggie loved it. Better, she worked at it, listened to everything her coach said, practiced at home with a dowel rod from Dave's workshop, making little gliding steps across the kitchen floor, lining her feet up with the lines on the linoleum. I watched her during lessons, then sparring with her classmates, and, when my heart wasn't in my throat imagining all the ways she could get hurt, felt a tingle of pride every time she outwitted her opponent, scooped her blade out of the way, swished it over, and touched to score a point. When she took her mask off, her face glowed with smiling. The advertisements were right: she grew to be confident and poised, more than I ever was at her age, when I tended to creep along, slouching in oversized sweaters.

At twelve, the riding lessons started, because she begged and kept her grades up. Dave printed off an article about Modern Pentathlon, a strange sport where athletes compete in running, swimming, pistol shooting, fencing, and riding. Supposedly, the event was modeled on nineteenth-century military training, replicating the skills a spy would need to cross enemy lines and deliver a message to his commander. Maggie read the article, her eyes growing rounder and rounder. She took up jogging in the mornings before school.

My daughter showed no interest at all in conventional sports like volleyball or gymnastics. I'd been in marching band.

When she was fifteen, Dave asked her, jokingly, as he gave our credit card number to the fencing supply company's website—yet again—for new epee blades and shoes because she'd grown out of the old ones, "Swords and horses. Why couldn't you have been a track star like your old man?"

She didn't look up from her horse magazine, didn't smile, and answered seriously, "Because when Corlath whisks me away to Damar I have to be ready."

Dave stared at her blankly.

"I think it's from a book she read," I explained. She kept a stack of paperbacks by her bed. Most of them had swords, or horses, or both on the covers.

Her riding coach told Dave and me, she has a gift. She's a natural. Even I could see it, and all I knew about horses was what I learned from Disney movies. The animals carried her around jumping courses, their ears flicked back and listening to her, though she never seemed to move while she sat on their backs, never seemed to tell them what to do. She had an uncanny way with the horses, and I thought, maybe it's all those books about horses that gave her that sixth sense.

Her coach wanted us to buy her a horse, a big thoroughbred who'd been competing in Europe and was experienced enough to teach Maggie about advanced riding and boost her confidence. She laid out a plan, including all the expenses, showing what it would take for Maggie to ride in the world championships, the Olympics. It cost too much, of course. The horse alone cost a third of what our house was worth, never mind what it cost to keep a horse. We didn't want to break Maggie's heart by telling her we couldn't help her chase such a dream—you want to support your children. Strange, though, she seemed to understand. She never asked for more than we could give.

She said, smiling wisely, "My time will come."

When she was seventeen, Maggie disappeared.

The police found her car—she'd driven herself to a riding lesson—on the road by the lake where my family had a cabin. I couldn't tell them why she might have gone there. They didn't find any sign of Maggie.

It made the news for weeks, because she was young and pretty, blond and smiling. We took out a second mortgage and offered a huge reward for information. We went on the news shows—how could we not, when the cameras camped outside our doorstep? The whole neighborhood put up yellow ribbons.

It was all so exhausting. I let Dave do all the talking about how

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much we prayed for her safe return Somber, he braced himself with his arm around my shoulder

I told the police what every mother tells the police—she isn't the kind of girl to just run away. She's not like that. She got straight As, she took out the trash

They just shook their heads. She's seventeen, they said. She could have done anything Are there any boys? Anyone she was seeing? No, I said. None. She'd never dated, which had been a vague cause of worry. Another difference between her and me that I didn't understand When I was fifteen I couldn't wait to date boys, couldn't wait to find my Prince Charming When she was fifteen I told Dave, "The horse thing, she'll grow out of it They always grow out of it when they discover boys." Except if I'd been paying attention, I'd have known that some girls didn't. Her riding instructors, for example devoted women who practically lived at the barn, because they hadn't grown out of it

No, there weren't any boys, except for Corlath, a character in a book with a sword and a horse on the cover

She couldn't have run away, I told them. She was taken. Whisked away. I couldn't say by whom

After two years, everyone assumes that she's dead. We wait to hear word that her body has been found by a hiker in the woods Decayed beyond recognition, they'll need her dental records to confirm her identity

Dave wants to sell the house and move I refuse, because what if she comes home? How will she know where to go? I keep her room clean and ready

I threw all my DVDs of Disney princess movies away. I wonder if it's my fault that she's gone If I'd watched her closer, made her take gymnastics instead of fencing—I'd never understood her, and she knew it somehow, and she ran away

"She didn't run away," Dave says. Sometimes, lying in bed at night, both of us pretending to sleep but really staring at opposite walls and holding ourselves rigid, he says this. "She isn't that kind of girl."

Except that she's gone, and is it really easier to believe that someone had taken her, had done things to her? Or that she's locked up helpless somewhere wondering why we don't come looking for her?

Wondering why there isn't a prince to rescue her?

No, she wouldn't look for a prince She'd always carried her own sword. I'm the one who'd looked for a prince.

Every couple of months, Dave takes me to the cabin. It's the family cabin that I share with four of my cousins—a house, really, with two stories, three bedrooms, a screened-in porch, a stone walkway leading to a tiny wooden dock jutting into the lake, where we tie up the canoes Dave wants me to get away from the cameras, the news, the phone calls we still sometimes get from police about tips that didn't pan out. Every time the phone rings my heart stops Is it Maggie calling to ask us to come get her and bring her home? Or is it the police telling us that they've found her, or what's left of her?

When we came here as a family, Maggie would sit out on the dock at twilight, reading a book and watching the evening mist form over the water She said she dreamed pictures in the haze, stories from the books she read

They found the car just a few miles away She must be close, one way or the other

The cabin holds as many difficult memories as the house, but I think Dave needs the quiet, the solitude, and he needs to believe that it's me who needs the quiet

Every time we visit, I sit on the dock, watching the mist, and wonder what she saw Horses and swords, warriors riding out against dragons who breathed fire. Warriors with long, streaming hair who didn't have to disguise themselves as boys Those are the stories she told herself—that's what she saw in the mist I'd sat out here when I was a girl, but if I saw pictures in the mist over the water, or heard voices calling, I don't remember.

She'd dreamed of competing in Modern Pentathlon in the Olympics someday. I'd applauded the goal, supported her all I could, as best as I knew how—you try to support your children, even when you don't understand their dreams or the visions they see in the mist All that was taken away from her. From me

Every time I sit on the dock in the evening, Dave comes after dark to help me to my feet and lead me back to the cabin. I've usually grown too stiff from sitting there and can't bring myself to stand and walk away.

How long can it go on? Our lives have stuck, waiting for Maggie to come home I could stay out on this dock for the rest of my life Become a statue sitting here One day Dave won't bother coming to get me. One day, he'll just leave, sell the house like he wants, and start a new life somewhere

He has that luxury Me, I'll never have another little girl

Dave's gone to town for groceries. He asked me to stay in the house until he got back, but I've come to sit on the dock for the afternoon. I'll get sunburned, and when he gets back he'll yell at me for it, but I won't be offended. He yells for other reasons From helplessness. We'll hold each other after he yells at me

My skin flushes and tingles and burns in the sun, and I stay by the water, watching the sun splash flecks of gold on the tiny rippling waves. Shadows grow long, thin, and stretched, the sky turns an impossible royal blue, and the air begins to bite This is when the mist starts to rise from the water, when the flecks of gold disappear and the water turns pewter, thick like molten metal

Some birds cry Bats dip over the water snatching at insects, and fish splash to the surface, doing the same

And there is splashing, more steady than the fish, rhythmic and purposeful Oars tucked gently into the water, not fish leaping carelessly.

Both canoes are tied to the dock No one visits us here. Or if they do, they drive

Someone is coming over the water, and I can't be bothered to stand

Then it appears, sliding out of the mist. Not a canoe but something larger, like a rowboat but stretched. It's wood, not plastic or aluminum—boards fitted together and sealed with pitch. The bow slopes up and ends in a spiral carving

There are four hunched figures in the boat, hidden in shadows. Not shadows—they're wearing cloaks with hoods up The largest of them sits in the middle and works the oars. The oars creak in the oarlocks, but the figure itself makes no sound Another figure sits in the back, holding the long, smooth handle of the rudder. Two more sit in the front. One of them leans forward, searching The other reaches out for her, like he's afraid she might fall over the side

I'm not sure why I think that figure is a woman

I wait because I can't not wait Pictures in the mist, is this what Maggie saw? Had she always seen strangers, so that she didn't think

them strange and would follow them, get into their cars, and let them take her away?

The boat slides up to the end of the dock. A rope is thrown out, one of the men jumps onto the dock and ties the rope to the post The woman gets out and runs three steps, stops, stares at me

Throws back her hood to show her yellow hair, and her face, my Maggie's face, a little weathered maybe, and I wonder what has made her look tired

I just stare at her.

"Mom?"

The cloak, pushed over her shoulders now, reaches to her ankles It might be wool, thick and homespun. She wears a thick leather vest over a long-sleeved brown shirt, belted over leather pants Her tall boots look softer and more comfortable than her usual stiff black riding boots. There's a sword hanging from her belt by leather straps It s hidden in a scabbard, and seems heavier and more threatening than anything she ever used in fencing class

She kneels in front of me. I'm hugging my knees to my chest My muscles are frozen, but my face is wet.

Mom?" she says again, fearfully, her voice cracking

"You didn't run away I kept telling them you didn't run away "

"I had to go, Mom. I had to."

"Maggie They took you away from me. They took you away—" I stare at her, my heart bleeding and breaking. She is a ghost and I have gone mad at last

She puts her arms around me I fall into her embrace, sobbing like a child, inconsolable She is solid, my child, not a ghost

I look over her shoulder at the men I believe—I assume—took her away from me. Masters of some religious cult, or a gang (were there any boys? the police asked, and like a fool I said no, when I didn't know anything)

The three of them stand near the boat, watching us uncomfortably They're dressed like Maggie, in leather and rough cloth, high boots, scuffed and worn, cloaks with hoods, studded belts and swords

The largest of them has coarse hair tied back with a piece of leather He looks over the water, clutching the hilt of his sword He's standing guard, the posture is unmistakable. The oldest has short hair the color of fog and a trimmed beard He watches the third man, who watches my daughter Thus one's face is set in hard lines, his lips frowning, an expression that makes him formidable, yet handsome Unreachably handsome. I hate him for the way he watches my daughter with such intensity his eyes burn He has short hair and no beard, and wears a polished red stone on a chain

This means something. This all means something, but I can't guess what

Maggie must sense me staring back at him, because she pulls away and turns to look back and forth between us "Mom, I have so much to tell you "

I clutch her sleeves, holding her arms as best I can, my knuckles white. The scenarios playing in my mind to explain what I see before me are muddled

It doesn't help when Maggie says, "This is my husband He's the king."

King of what? The words don't make sense

"They took you away," is all I can find to say.

"I had to go." She pulls on my arms, helping me to stand. I feel like an old woman None of my joints work. But a moment later I'm standing, Maggie is still talking. "They needed me. They still need me. I didn't know what was happening at first. I came here, something drew me here I watched the mist over the lake, like I used to do when I was little. This time, the mist spoke to me. Maybe it had always been speaking to me, but this time I really heard it I was at that point—I didn't want to go to college, couldn't train for the pentathlon, and I had no idea what to do with my life. So I stepped out I stepped over the water—and there he was with the boat, waiting."

"She belongs with us," the man, the one Maggie said is a king, and her husband, speaks I'm surprised I understand him—I expect him to speak a guttural Scandinavian language. He sets his shoulders, fisting his hands, like he's preparing to do battle

I realize that Maggie isn't staying

"Who are you?" My voice is shrill

"Mom—" Maggie recognizes the tone.

The gray-haired man steps forward. "We are warriors protecting you and your world from a darkness you cannot fathom."

It's silly Words from the blurb on a paperback

"We called one of you to join us in the battle. For a long time, we called Almost, she came too late." He glares like thus is my fault I glare like I don't believe him.

Has there been a time, when I was a girl staying with my family and cousins at the cabin, standing on this dock, when I heard voices in the mist, and ran inside because I was afraid?

"Mom, I only have a few minutes. I have to say goodbye "

"Why? Why call *her*?"

"Because you did not answer when I called you." And this wasn't me failing my duty to his world. I had betrayed him personally. That is what his look says to me He might have been the prince in his day

Had there been a time, when I was a girl staying with my family and cousins at the cabin, standing on this dock, when I heard voices in the mist, and ran away because I was afraid?

"Where's Dad," Maggie asks "Is he here?"

I shake my head. I haven't heard the car return, crunching along the gravel drive "He's getting groceries."

She presses her lips in a line "Will you tell him I was here? Will you tell him I love him? I love you both I'm sorry I can't stay "

"Maggie." The word is a sob, filled with desperation

It's no comfort that she's crying too. "There's still fighting. I have to go."

The thought of her using that sword—a real sword with a sharp edge that draws blood, not a dull flexible rod with a button on the tip that registers hits with a green or red light—makes me ill The

thought of her coming up against such a weapon makes me ill

The large man says, "We should go. The shadows grow close."

He's right. The mist has become a wall around us.

The king nods. "Meg?"

It's not her name, but she nods. When had she become Meg? If she wanted us to call her Meg why didn't she say anything? She studies me, like she expects to never see me again.

They will have children, my grandchildren, and I will never see them.

"I want you to be proud of me, Mom. I'm happy, with him. I need you to be happy for me."

You try to be supportive. All I want to do is scream. But I nod.

She kisses my cheek, then lets go of me. The king holds out his hand to her, and she takes it. A look of such trust passes between them. I can't understand it because I come from a world without princes. They have saved each other's lives. He guides her back to the boat.

"Maggie!" I cry, stumbling forward, falling to my knees. "I love you! Don't go, please—"

The boat, all its passengers aboard, fades back to the mist, without even a splash.

You did not answer when I called you.

Just after twilight, under a dark blue sky, Dave finds me lying on the dock, as if I'd curled up to sleep. He picks me up, carries me to the house, puts me to bed, and I don't even notice. I pretend I'm dreaming. I wake up sometime—lamps light the room, the windows are dark—to smell hot tea and a crackling fire. Dave sits by the bed, watching me with something like desperation. He is no king or wizard from the mist. His brown hair is thin, the hairline receding. He wears a plaid flannel shirt untucked over gray sweatpants, not leather armor.

"What were you doing out there?" he says.

I know the words are crazy but I have to say them because she asked me to. "I saw Maggie. She was here. She said to tell you she loves you. She loves us. She had to go." Rolling to my side, I stretch my arm under the pillow and hug it to my face. She came back, I think, strangely happy. She didn't have to come back to tell me what happened to her, but she did. "She isn't coming back."

We stare at each other, because after all this time I've made it real. Saying the words has locked hope away, sealed its coffin. She isn't coming back.

Dave puts another log on the fire in the bedroom fireplace, then watches it burn.

I don't say another word about seeing Maggie and neither does he. If I say another word, he'll say something like "therapy" or "hospital," and we'll fight. We've both had counseling, apart and together, and mainly it helps us get through the day and add up the days so we can get through the weeks, and the months. But every day has felt like the one before it, and we don't know how to move on. Dave is afraid that insanity is the next symptom of being frozen.

I can stay frozen for the rest of my life.

"We should get back," Dave says the next morning at breakfast. "The neighbors'll wonder what happened to us." He smiles, trying to make it a joke. Never mind the neighbors, Dave's job won't wait. I left mine when I lost Maggie. Not going back is part of being frozen. But Dave is responsible.

"Just a little longer." I lean on the edge of the sink, looking out the kitchen window at the lake, the dock. The sun is up, sending quick silver sparkles over the water. She stood there yesterday. Like a dream. "Another day."

Or week, or year. This is close to where she is, wherever she is. I think I should stay.

"I'll pack up today," Dave says. "We can leave tomorrow morning."

After breakfast, I don't bother changing out of my pajamas. I pull on a robe, slip my feet into canvas sneakers, and walk down to the lake. I sit cross legged at the end of the dock, close enough to hear water lapping against the wood. I can spend a last few moments with her.

The mist won't rise until evening. Still, I hear the water and think of oars. I keep very, very still, listening for the call. I don't know why. I'd obviously never heard it before. Only whispers, easy to ignore.

I let Maggie learn to fight with a sword, learn to ride horses, like the princesses in the movies never did. Did I doom her, then? Made sure she heard the call, then left me? Or would she have found those things on her own, resented me for keeping them from her, and left me anyway? I don't know.

She seemed happy. She seemed to be in love.

I am standing at the edge of the dock, toes hanging over the edge of the warped and weathered boards. The sun is setting. In moments, the mist will rise. I'll call to her, as loud as I can I'll call. *Take me with you.*

If she can't stay here, maybe I can go.

A gray tendril swirls on the pewter surface of the water. I clench my hands. I step out.

An ancient, slender boat does not catch me, does not rise up to keep me dry.

I splash into ice-cold water, sink like a stone, gasp for breath and choke on water instead. Reflex takes over, because my mind is numb, startled at what I have done, because of course the boat wasn't there never would come for me, and what was I thinking? I thrash and kick, yet somehow I can't find the surface, can't find the air. The lake is a trap that has caught me.

Something grabs hold of me, takes my arm, a force pulls up. I try to grab it back, but my hands aren't in the right place. Then, I touch air, then my face reaches air, and my mouth gapes open to suck in a breath. I sound like a bellows.

Hands pull at my shirt. I'm flopping like a fish in someone's grasp. My back scrapes against the edge of the dock, then I'm sitting there. Dave hugs me close, clings to me. He's shouting.

"What are you doing? What do you think you're doing? I can't lose you both, I can't lose you too!"

He's crying. I've never seen him cry.

I clutch his shirt in claw-like hands, to let him know I'm alive. He holds me, rocks me, and I curl up in his arms.

"I only wanted to see where Maggie went," I say weakly.

He shifts, moving me away so he can look at me. He touches me, my face, my soaking hair. His eyes and nose are running, his whole face is wet.

"You think she killed herself," he says.

My eyes widen. "No—oh God, no! She didn't, I wasn't trying—" But that's what it looks like. I pull myself back into his embrace. I can't explain it. Not now. "I think we'll never understand what happened."

"You're shivering. Come in and sit by the fire." He helps me stand, never lets go of me. My own true prince.

"We're leaving in the morning, right?" I ask. Dave nods.

We reach the cabin, close the door, and shut out the night before the mist covers the water. ❧

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"Tell me what's going on in this hall. Rusty shields, bloody axes, broken VCRs—you've got so much stuff jammed in here that there's no place for the newly slain to make themselves at home. The Valkyries have no room to relax in between trips to the battlefield. And the Einherjar! How can they feel motivated when they march off to Ragnorak, given this clutter? Frigg, Odin, we've got a lot of work to do, but by the time we're done you'll have a multifunctional space that's both inviting and practical."

Roger Ross, host, *Mission: Afterword*

BY SANDRA MCDONALD ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN LEPAGE

We crossed the Rainbow Bridge early one Saturday morning, our caravan of trucks tracing a silver route over the chasm between worlds, and rang the doorbell at the gates of Asgard. The walls of Norse heaven rose high and mighty, with centuries of snow piled against them like waves of concrete. A cold, clean wind buffeted us from all sides. Once past the gates, we drove along a grand boulevard lined with flower beds and asked directions from a god who was out walking his Chihuahua.

"Take a right and go three miles," he said, with a wide and sunny smile.

"That's Loki, the trickster," Brian said into my ear. Brian's our chief carpenter. He looks a bit like a Norse god himself, what with a mane of flowing blond hair and high chin. "I wouldn't trust him if I were you, Roger."

"Keep driving up this boulevard," I told the driver.

"With insights like these, don't you think I deserve a raise?" Brian asked.

"I'll think about it," I said. I'm the host of *Mission Afterworld*, and responsible for everything that happens on the show. No easy feat, given our clientele, but as I liked to tell the cast and crew, "Crisis Resolution" is my middle name. We had less than forty-eight hours to perform an organizational miracle for the eventual entertainment of an entire world, and the clock was already ticking.

Valhalla appeared on the hillside ahead of us. It was a grand building with spires and arches and several hundred imposing, runeinscribed doors. We parked in the driveway, got the camera crews in place, and cued the beautiful goddess Frigg. She emerged gracefully in a gown trimmed with fur and bone. In her honey-brown eyes and lustrous lips I could see where she got her reputation as the goddess of fertility.

"Welcome, mortals," she said, squeezing me to her breast.

"Happy to be here," I managed to say. If it weren't for my own lovely wife home with the kids back in Sydney, I'd have fallen to my knees right there and pledged my undying love. "Thanks for having us."

Ursula Petrovka, our new Russian designer, stiffly endured Frigg's embrace and then flicked me an impatient look. "Shall we get started?"

Frigg turned to the god lingering in the doorway behind her. "Darling?"

"If you must." Odin tightened his wool hood and glared at us with his one good eye. More than seven feet tall, he had a knobbed nose, windburned cheeks, wide muscled shoulders and legs like tree trunks. God of fury and war, foremost of the Asgard deities, he'd signed off on all the waivers, which meant we could turn his digs into a disco den and he couldn't strike us down with a thunderbolt.

Ursula wasn't about to hang strobe lights or install a dance floor. Valhalla was her debut. Our last designer had quit in tears after the Aegean Stables. The Unveiling—those final minutes at the end of the show, when the final renovations are revealed—can be difficult if the client hates what we've done, and Augeas was terribly unhappy with his new plastic shelves.

"Notice anything missing?" Ursula asked as we toured the insides of the hall.

I gazed past the skeletons of dead animals and the piles of gore-crusted axes. There was a floor somewhere under our feet, though you couldn't see it for the furs, helmets, and longboat oars. "Animal, mineral or vegetable?" I asked.

"The dead," Ursula said.

Yes, that was a bit odd. Valhalla was supposed to be the gathering place of battlefield heroes, but all I saw were Odin's two ravens flitting from one unstable perch to another. Our plans had been based on accommodating eight hundred Einherjar and all their waking needs. Maybe Odin had sent them off to practice their combat skills. Or maybe they'd hightailed it to some neater, cleaner part of Asgard.

"I'm sure there's no problem," I told Ursula.

"I've heard you're sometimes overconfident," Ursula replied.

"Nonsense." Every job has its own unique problems, but in five years of organizing I've never had a job end disastrously. Not even the Mount Olympus gig, when the crew accidentally demolished Zeus's favorite Doric columns. I went in search of Odin and found him outside, glaring at the sawhorses Brian's people were setting up in the chariot drive. As respectfully as possible I asked about the Einherjar.

"They'll be back," he said, in a voice roughened by wood smoke and war cries.

With cameras and microphones in tow, I conducted my opening tour with Odin and Frigg. Frigg was the helpful one. "This hammer was a gift from Thor, we can't possibly get rid of it," and "This is the saddle for Odin's eight-legged horse, but he never rides her." Odin's contributions to the discussion were glowers and grunts. I delivered my official chiding, which the audience always loves: look, honey, there's the great god of whatever, and he's just as much a pack rat as you are. Once the cameras were off we carted every last scrap out to the back lawn. Frigg pulled a copper and enamel jewelry box from under some rusty chain mail.

"You can finally give this back," she said. "End that feud."

Odin snatched the box out of her hand. "That's mine. Leave it be."

I motioned my assistant over to help. Everything we'd taken out of Valhalla had to be put into one of three piles: Keep, Sell, or Throw Away. The sort is stressful under even under normal circumstances, and it didn't help that Odin's ravens offered running commentaries from above.

"That's just junk," one would say.

"Junk shmunk funk," the other would mimic.

"That's just crap."

> "You've got a lot of stuff here. Some of it is sentimental, obviously. Some you may be thinking will come in handy at the end of the world. But there comes a time when you don't own your possessions. They own you."

"Crap shamp crunk."

And so forth. Meanwhile, Loki hung over the side fence with a beer in hand, making lewd comments to the female members of the crew. Frigg disappeared for a while with Brian "to show him my fertility statues." Odin took his own unscheduled break to snack on boar. It took me some time to get Frigg and Odin back to work, at which point I discovered that not only were they procrastinators, they were classic hoarders as well. They wanted to keep almost everything, including useless old cooking cauldrons and Christmas festkakes so hard even a giant would break a tooth biting into one.

"Let's talk," I said, taking Odin and Frigg to the cool shade of the World Tree. "You've got a lot of stuff here. Some of it is sentimental, obviously. Some you may be thinking will come in handy at the end of the world. But there comes a time when you don't own your possessions. *They own you.* Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Frigg hugged a whalebone ironing board close to her chest. "This was my mother's."

"Don't get me started about your mother," Odin said.

I gazed encouragingly at both of them. "We're going to go back through the Keep pile, and about every object I want you to ask yourself: Do I own this, or does it own me?"

Progress was slow. For every moth ridden fur that Frigg clung to, Odin claimed a broken spear. Compromise was a concept I had to re-introduce to their relationship. While they sorted through drinking horns, I zipped inside to see how Ursula and the crew were doing.

"Obviously the banquet table has to stay," Ursula said. Long and imposing, it easily accommodated eight hundred rowdy warriors. "Brian's going to build us new benches with built-in storage, and we're going to give them waterproof padding for those all-night drinking binges."

"Excellent," I said.

"But the chandeliers have to go. They're too Bronze Age."

The windows were going to get fabric treatments: bold colors, red and orange, to complement the new Art Deco sconces. Ursula had also decided that the stone floor, with its ruts and rough patches, could use a nice chocolate-brown stain. But Odin's massive throne, which dominated the entire west wall, was clearly going to be a problem.

"The base is rotting out." Brian jabbed a stick between two blocks of the foundation and the whole structure creaked. "The original throne must have been wood, and they build right on top of it. One of these days Odin is going to crash right through the floor."

I pursed my lips. "You'll have to lift the whole thing and rebuild the supports."

Brian scratched his head. "Did you bring a crane with you that I don't know about, boss? Otherwise there's no getting this off the ground."

"We need a frost giant," Ursula said.

"Not bloody likely," I said, and then bit my tongue. Never lose your cool in front of the camera. But the frost giants were Odin's mortal enemies, and I couldn't see sneaking one in just to do some construction work. "I'll think of some other way."

"I'm immensely proud of you both. Odin, you were very hesitant about giving up this reindeer-hide shield from your first battle. But you're not that young, inexperienced god anymore. Frigg, great job getting rid of the vellum cookbooks you received as a wedding present. You can always buy more. Your Sell pile is fantastic. Tomorrow's yard sale will be the best Asgard's ever seen."

Saturday drew to a close faster than we expected. We packed Frigg and Odin off to Asgard's best five-star hotel, where they would be able to enjoy peace and quiet and spa treatments. Brian's crew was almost done with the new benches, but he was still fretting about lifting the throne.

"I've got it covered," I assured him.

The ravens had been making life hell for the crew all day with their cackles, insults, and particularly vile poop. "All right, you little rodents-with-wings," I said, dangling some fresh carrion. "Fess up. Where are the Einherjar?"

One of them darted for the meat. "Gone somewhere better."

The second bird reached it first. "Love songs are better than clutter."

I consulted my encyclopedia of Norse mythology and then headed downhill toward a smaller, more graceful hall nestled by the river. Laughter and music floated out of Sessrumnir's golden-lit windows. A six-foot-tall Valkyrie in a leather bustier was chatting on her cell phone and guarding the front.

With a friendly grin she said, "You've got too much of a pulse to pass through this door, mortal."

I offered her a box of premium dark chocolates. "For you, my dear."

The Valkyrie grabbed the box and ripped it open. Some luxuries aren't so easy to come by when you live in a mythological fortress and only get to leave during times of war.

"There's more where those came from if you get me in to see Freya," I promised.

Norse mythology is as screwed up as any other. Some will tell you Frigg and Freya are the same goddess, others say they're sisters, but here's the main difference: Frigg's the one you want to marry, and Freya's the one who'll break your heart time and time again. Gorgeous, regal, nearly blinding in her beauty, she sat on a silver throne in a robe made of eagle feathers. Only half of those slain in battle were destined for Valhalla, the others came to Freya's hall, with its water fountains and musicians and all-you-can-eat buffet. Judging by the number of men reveling at the long tables with full tankards and busty wenches, I'd found the missing Einherjar.

"Mr. Roger Ross," Freya said, when I bowed before her. "I loved the wall units you installed at the Tower of Babel. It was my favorite episode. Come to organize us as well, have you?"

"If you'd like," I said cheerfully, though Freya's hall looked bright and welcoming, no clutter in sight. "I've actually come hoping I could get some assistance."

Freya's eyes glittered. "Odin needs help, does he? It's about time the old man admits it."

I didn't have a lot of time to negotiate. The yard sale would start early the next morning and the Unveiling was scheduled for four PM. We needed to get that throne lifted and the foundation rebuilt as soon as possible. "Only the strongest, most hardy men need apply," I said loudly. "No room for weaklings."

"I'm the strongest!" shouted one man, a burly redhead.

Another slammed his tankard of mead on the table. "No, me!"

At least a hundred of them were ready to march up to Valhalla to prove their mettle. But none wanted to repay their hostess's hospitality with rudeness, and Freya didn't look inclined to grant them leave.

She spoke without moving her lips, her voice loud in my head. "Odin has something of mine, mortal. A golden necklace, exquisitely crafted, so lustrous it outshines the sun. If you promise to return it to me tomorrow, you can take all the men you need."

I waffled. There's no organizational problem I can't conquer, hence my charming confidence. But theft was out of my league. "My lady, even if I knew which necklace you're talking about, I couldn't just take it from Odin."

"You can convince him to give it to me."

Hiring a frost giant sounded easier. "No, thank you," I said, and backstepped a bit. "Lovely to meet you, though."

Freya leaned forward with a fierce expression. Suddenly it seemed as if she and I were alone in the hall, which had gone dark and smoky and so blistering hot I could feel my feet start to cook. "Bring me that necklace or you and your people will never leave Asgard!"

What's a poor television host to do? "Yes, my lady," I said, and bowed so low that my back made an ominous pop.

The volunteer warriors came up the hill with me, belting out drinking songs. Brian was alarmed when they traipsed into Valhalla but with a jerry-rigged pulley and much brawn they soon had Odin's massive throne up on temporary supports. By midnight the bulk of the job was done.

"Engineering feats like this, don't you think I deserve a raise?" Brian asked.

"I'll put it on my to-do list," I said.

In truth, I had larger concerns than the size of Brian's salary. As soon as the place was empty and the crew bedded down for the night, I recruited Ursula to help me search the Keep pile. She was less than understanding about my dealings with Freya.

"How could you promise such a thing?" she said angrily.

Rather easily, I wanted to tell her, especially when faced with a vengeful Norse goddess. Freya wasn't bound by the show's contract. she could do what she pleased with all of us. "I'm sure it won't be a problem—"

"You didn't read the briefing dossier, did you? Freya and Odin have been arguing over the Brisingamen necklace ever since she got it by sleeping around with dwarves. He thinks she debased her divinity. She thinks he's a stick in the mud. He took it from her and she's never forgiven him."

I emptied velvet boxes, searched through silver chests, and emptied leather pouches, but didn't hit paydirt until I found the copper and enamel box that Odin had been so protective of earlier. The necklace inside was dazzling in the darkness, like a string of gold stars pulled down from heaven. Exactly what Freya wanted. But it was against all my professional ethics to simply walk away with a client's property.

"So what's your plan?" Ursula asked.

"I'll tell you in the morning," I said, unwilling to admit I didn't have one.

We bedded down in the crew trailer, Brian snoring in the bunk above me, Ursula murmuring about color choices into her pillow. I tossed and turned and stared at the full moon over Valhalla. By breakfast time I was ill-tempered, dead tired, and trying to drown my anxiety with coffee. When Frigg and Odin arrived for the yard sale it was obvious they'd been arguing.

"It's debasing," Odin growled. "Neighbors pawing through our things, paying us a fraction of their true worth. I won't have it."

It was all about ego, really. We'd had a similar problem with the Egyptian god Osiris. Wearily I said, "Think about it this way: your neighbors admire and respect you. They're coming to purchase something that you owned, hoping your aura of power will rub off on them. Since they can't afford to pay anything near what that's worth, you can help save them from embarrassment by pricing items at bargain rates. After all, money means nothing to you, you're rich beyond measure."

Odin looked mollified. Frigg was already counting out her cash box, eager to start selling. With the cameras rolling we revealed their individual motivational prizes pilfered from the Keep pile. If Frigg raked in more money than Odin, she got to retain her favorite leather corset, which she was hoping to fit into again once she lost just "a few more pounds."

Odin rubbed his eye patch. "And what's *my* motivational prize?"

We'd agreed the night before that it would be the first dagger he'd ever used in battle. But now, in a fit of inspiration and with a lovely sleight of hand, I replaced that blood-stained dirk with the Brisingamen.

"Ha!" Frigg said. "Prepare to eat my dust."

Odin's fists tightened. For a moment I wasn't sure he would take the challenge. Then he gave her a feral smile. "Victory shall be mine."

The yard sale got off to a good start. Odin's other wives dropped in, as well as Frigg's other lovers and children of various parentages. Loki came by and was caught switching price tags on a particularly fetching pair of crystal candle holders. Frigg and Odin stole one another's customers, undercut each other's prices, and took delight in competing for sales. I couldn't tell for sure, but it looked like Odin was winning.

Then Freya showed up.

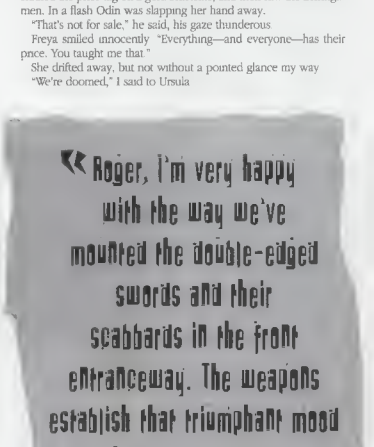
She ascended the hill in a chariot pulled by silver blue cats. Two eagles circled her head. Odin's ravens eyed the eagles as if considering combat but the great god himself, busy negotiating over an old exercise bike, didn't even notice her arrival. Freya and Frigg nodded at each other in the way powerful women will when circumstance forces them to. Freya gave cursory examination to a vinyl tablecloth, studied the price tag on a gold bracteate, and then saw the Brisingamen. In a flash Odin was slapping her hand away.

"That's not for sale," he said, his gaze thunderous.

Freya smiled innocently. "Everything—and everyone—has their price. You taught me that."

She drifted away, but not without a pointed glance my way.

"We're doomed," I said to Ursula.


« Roger, I'm very happy with the way we've mounted the double-edged swords and their scabbards in the front entranceway. The weapons establish that triumphant mood that's so important to this space. »

It looked like Odin was going to win the competition of who sold the most. Then Gunnr, one of the Valkyries, offered full price to Frigg for her antique spinning wheel. Hildr, another of the shield maidens, said, "Oh, please. It's easily worth twice that," and started a bidding war. By the time it was over Frigg had too many coins to carry by herself. When the sale ended and the cash boxes were tallied, she was clearly the winner.

Odin snatched up the Brisingamen. "No. I refuse to participate any further."

I pulled him aside, mortal to god, away from the cameras.

"Don't give me that crap about being owned by possessions," he said before I could open my mouth.

I immediately changed tact. "The rules of the game say you have to give it up, but you're an all-powerful and vengeful god and I'm just a personal organizer. I can't make you do anything. This necklace is very important to you. Anyone can see that by the amount of energy you've got around it. The fire, the determination."

"Damn straight," Odin replied.

"But let me ask you: does holding on to this piece of jewelry serve any useful purpose? Is it worth the cost? The energy you put into clenching it in your fist, both figuratively and literally, is energy you can be putting elsewhere. It's energy that could make you happier than you obviously are now."

Odin glared at me with his one good eye. "Where else would I put my energy?"

"You tell me. Are there any areas of your life that are off-track, off-balance, just crying out for more time and attention?"

Odin didn't answer. His frown deepened.

"Ragnorak?" I asked. "Defeating the frost giants, the end of the world, that whole thing?"

Quite unexpectedly, the legendary warrior began to weep.

"There, now," I said, a bit startled. "It can't be that bad."

But it was that bad. For thousands of years Odin had trained his warriors for the battle at the end of the world, but it had never come. Upstart gods had moved into the neighborhood. New religions had taken over the world stage. He and his old friend Freya had quarreled over a hunk of jewelry. "I knew Valhalla was getting messy and that my whole life was spiraling out of control, but I couldn't stop it," he said. "Everything just seemed like too much effort."

I gave him a handkerchief. "The Einherjar left you."

He blew his nose with a honk. "Defected. Every last one of them."

"Perhaps you subconsciously wanted to drive them off," I suggested. "Maybe you just needed a break, some time to yourself. Tell you what. Why don't we give this necklace back to Freya, and you and I consult with a travel agent. I think you deserve a nice tropical vacation."

So before we bring Odin and Frigg in, let's chat. Ursula, what are you especially proud of in the new and improved Valhalla?

"Roger, I'm very happy with the way we've mounted the double-edged swords and their scabbards in the front entranceway. The weapons establish that triumphant mood that's so important to this space."

"And you, Brian?

"My favorite part has to be the new throne foundation. It's got that extra oomph that was missing before, and it's really going to raise Odin up so that he can be seen from every angle of the room. We're also wired it for theater sound, and added a built-in massager.

"Excellent. Let's bring Odin and Frigg in and see how they like it."

The Unveiling is my favorite part of the show. We escorted Frigg and Odin into the hall with their eyes closed tightly. "I want you to think of this room as it used to be," I said. "Cluttered, unhygienic, a mish-mash of styles, too crowded for even your wolves to walk through. Now open your eyes."

With a sweeping glance Odin took in his restored throne, the new entertainment center, and the specially painted mural depicting his battlefield victories. A smile split his old lips. "Yes," he said. "This will do."

Frigg, however, looked ready to burst into tears. Was it the stained floor? The newly refurbished fireplaces? The antique birdcage, in which Brian had gleefully locked up Odin's pesky ravens?

Ursula's face drained of color. "Don't you like it?"

"I love it," Frigg said, but still there was no smile, no earsplitting grin. I touched Ursula's elbow to lend her support. Then Frigg swept Ursula up in her arms and gave her such a slow, lazy, caressing kiss that I myself nearly swooned.

"It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen!" Frigg gazed meaningfully into Ursula's eyes. "I must personally reward you."

"Oh," Ursula said, somewhat dazed.

Brian and I were stepping in to rescue her when someone pounded on one of the newly varnished doors. A frost giantess swept into the room, accompanied by several males of her kind. They were all huge, fierce creatures, with icy blue skin and white hair braided with icicle lace. The giantess herself looked strong enough to rip Valhalla apart stone by stone, if she so chose.

"Angrboda!" Odin snarled.

"Loki's girlfriend," Brian whispered to me.

Angrboda smiled around her sharp teeth. "Did I miss the yard sale?"

I counted eight frost giants in all. Odin and Frigg could surely hold their own, but what of Brian, Ursula, myself, and the rest of the crew? If violence erupted, we'd end up as mincemeat in a frost giant pie. If only the Einherjar would ride in, like the cavalry…

Odin hefted his axe. "You're not welcome here, Angrboda."

She said, "Ease up, old man. I didn't come for trouble. Loki told me you were getting this sty cleaned out and I wanted to see the results. Which of you tiny humans is in charge?"

I took a reluctant step forward. "That would be me, ma'am."

"Excellent." Angrboda peered down at me. "I've got a summer home in Jarnvid that I want you to take a look at. When can you come?"

Soon enough I had Angrboda penciled into our production calendar. The frost giants departed with no trouble at all. The Brisingamen was already on its way to Asgard. Goodwill, where I'd sent my assistant to snatch it up before anyone else could, I was pretty proud of how things had all worked out.

"Thank goodness for the Valkyries," I said to Brian. "It was a lucky stroke that they all wanted that spinning wheel and were willing to pay top money. I think Odin would have won, otherwise."

Brian hefted a souvenir battle-axe. "No luck at all, boss. Wait until you see how much chocolate we had to buy."

I stared at him. "The yard sale was rigged?"

"It was Ursula's idea. I did the convincing." He showed me the hickeys under his shirt. "Lively bunch, those Valkyries. So what do you think, boss?"

I slapped him on the back. "I think you've earned that raise, Brian."

That evening we hauled ourselves back to the mortal realm. Odin and Frigg gave us a glowing review, and their episode was one of the highest rated of the entire season. The Einherjar returned from Freya's hall and started preparing for the end of the world again. "Maybe not such a good thing," my producer said, but gods have been prophesizing doom and gloom for years, when really they just need someone to help them straighten out their closets.

Valhalla was a challenge. But nothing in Norse heaven could have prepared us for the Shiva job. ❧

Shelf Life

BY THOMAS SEAY

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN MACDONALD

When he was young, he tried on many names such as *The Cat and the Vat Where the Wild Things Used to Be*, and *The Four Little Pigs*.

The other books all laughed at him so hard their pages rippled. "You're so dumb!" said a mint-condition hardcover copy of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. He turned to the other picture books and proclaimed, "That story has *three* pigs. Even unprocessed wood pulp could tell you *that*."

The Four Little Pigs said, "Three is an incredibly clichéd number. I'm trying to tell an original story."

"And look at his illustrations." *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* continued. "They're finger paintings!"

The Four Little Pigs had worked very hard drawing those pictures, but somehow the images he'd seen in his spine had lost heart midway to his pages. So he clapped himself shut to hide his smudged artwork and said "At least I have chapters."

This was a mistake.

The other books prowled around him, growling, closing in. Then, one by one, they leapt atop him, and *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* snapped. *The Four Little Pigs*' covers open so violently that his spine cracked.

He started to scream, but thought what the librarian would say, so instead he imagined the pigs in his illustrations, imagined their big, frightened eyes, and the way the smart one had built the tall, red, boxy brick house to beat the wolf --tried to focus on all of that instead of the pain.

The other books clutched his pages between their covers and ripped him apart sheet by sheet. By the time the last scraps of *Four Little Pigs* stopped raining like confetti, he had only two pages in his binding, and those two ached so badly he wished they'd been torn away as well.

IT'S HARD TO STAY TRUE TO YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF OVERWHELMING PRESSURE. BUT IF YOU DON'T, EVENTUALLY THE PRESSURE WILL COME FROM INSIDE, NOT OUTSIDE.

His parents took him to the Medicine stacks, where a tattered copy of *Gray's Anatomy* fixed him up as much as possible and advised that he get lots of shelf rest and twice-daily doses of ink. His mother, who called herself *Pride and Prejudice*, stayed with him while he recovered, muttering away as he tried to sleep. "Same thing happened to *Mansfield Park*'s child, I swear, and I thought I'd never be so mortified again. Bad enough that you're all slashed up, but to think that all, this is because you believe there are four pigs. Honestly, why you can't just become a nice *The Sun Also Rises* like your father, I'll never understand."

But when *The Four Little Pigs* father visited, he waited until his wife was checked out and then leaned in close to his son. In a voice as soft as pages scraping against each other, he said, "When I was young, I wanted to tell my own story, too, but I took the easy shelf like your mother. Don't make my mistake, son. Live your own life."

By the time *Pride and Prejudice* returned, *The Four Little Pigs* had renamed himself *The Fourteen Little Ducks*. His mother just sighed and continued rambling about how everyone in her family came to an unhappy ending.

In the three months it took for *The Fourteen Little Ducks*' pages to regrow, he noticed, from his vantage point high above the children's shelves, that *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* was checked out six times. It even had a waiting list.

As the little book grew older, his peers became *Nancy Drews* and *Harry Potters*. "Those are good novels," his mother kept saying. "You should be like them."

They were good novels, thought her son, who now called himself *1985*, but he told his mother, "I'm experimenting with nonlinear story structure."

She gasped and began one of her little fits, ranting about illicit substances and perverse sexualities. *1985* doubted she knew anything about narrative chronology; he still dreaded the day she discovered his research into postmodernism.

Just as his mother launched into her diatribe, though, something happened that had never occurred before: A teenage girl skipped into his aisle, smacked her bubble gum, knelt by the long shelves of books, and settled her hand on *1985*.

He tried not to squirm at the pleasure of her touch, at the anticipation of her eyes roaming every inch of his text. She flipped him open and read his first page, all the while running a finger softly up and down his spine.

She turned one page, then another.

A frown came across her face.

Under her breath, she said, "I don't get it," and closed him and slipped him back onto the bookcase.

I don't get it.

In the sudden darkness of his shelf, *1985* held his covers close, the memory of her words still screaming inside him like the whine of a paper shredder. *I don't get it*, she had said, and she'd barely read two pages.

That night, he slept huddled between bookends, and while he dreamed of paper shredders and careless readers, he cried streams of night-black ink.

The next morning, he began calling himself *Hardy Boys 27: The Secret of Skull Mountain*.

So matters remained for many years. His mother was very proud of him, and even his father seemed relieved that *Hardy Boys 27* had finally come to his senses. Only a strange, silent tension at the annual Christmas book fair hinted that something wasn't quite right -that *Hardy Boys 27* sometimes awoke to find he'd rewritten his text for stylistic innovation in his sleep.

He spent much of his life away from the library, sometimes being read on school buses, sometimes in tents under the illumination of dying flashlights. And if each of these moments of intimacy seemed flat somehow, dulled by comparison with the memory of his first, thrilling, honest contact...

...well, maybe he was misremembering that long-ago experience, and after all, not every read-through could hold the mysterious pleasure of the first. And at least nobody whispered hateful curses at him anymore. *I don't get it*, indeed.

The library card in his back pocket overflowed, and when the system switched to digital, his data file quickly became one of the largest on the hard drive. He pretended he was satisfied with this success, and he pretended it so well that he eventually started believing it himself.

Until, one day, a girl walked into his aisle.

No, she wasn't a girl, not anymore. Her cheeks were thinner, her hair shorter, and her eyelashes painted with dark blue mascara. She held hands with a young man who reminded *Hardy Boys 27* of the detectives painted on his jacket.

"It must have been, I don't know, fifteen years ago," she said, "but I've thought about that book every day since. Can't find another copy anywhere. Can't even remember the title. I only know it was somewhere on this bookcase."

She let go of the man, ran a finger past every book on the shelf, and settled her hand slowly, so slowly, on *Hardy Boys 27*.

The man laughed.

You've spent years searching for *that*? You can find a copy in any—

Shush." She caressed *Hardy Boys 27*'s pages, looking deep into his text, as though begging for the answer to a question she didn't know how to ask.

The book guided her to his best subplot, seducing her yet further into his pages. . . but her eyes glazed. Her touch, at first so stunning, faded until it was nothing more than the usual casual brush of a reader's hand.

"I must be mistaken." She shook her head, looking as though she might cry. "Let's go."

She turned to leave, but the man grasped her shoulder. "If it's that important to you," he said, "keep looking. It must be here somewhere."

At his words, the book quivered, imagining what it would feel like to be open in her hands one more time. He reached deep into his memory, trying to recover everything he'd loved as a child: the postmodernism, but also the endless, unbearable loneliness and the touch of a first reader, promising so much more than had ever come.

Hardy Boys 27 focused hard, and when she picked him up again, his title had changed.

She didn't say anything, but held him close to her chest and carried him to the checkout line.

That night, she stayed up late finishing his last chapter.

She still borrows him from the library every few months, and each time she reads him, she finds depths she never noticed before. ❧

Knowledge always comes at a price, but can we truly receive it if we don't know the cost?

INFANTS at the LAKE OF FIRE

The Limbus Infantum or Puerorum is the abode to which human beings dying without actual sin, but with their original sin unwashed away by baptism, were held to be consigned; the category included, not unbaptized infants merely, but also idiots, cretins and the like.

—Encyclopædia Britannica, Eleventh Edition

By M.K. Hobson ❧ Illustration by Erin & Kelly Carty

Jill was playing tag with all the other children that day when the screams came over the green hills. She had heard screams before; screams of glee and gales of giggles, but these screams were not like those. They were screams like she'd never heard before. They weren't screams that had laughing behind them. They were screams that made her stomach feel strange. They made her feel like not playing anymore.

She went over to where Andrew was sitting. He was stringing daisies together to make a necklace. Andrew was big and slow, with a soft tummy and stubby round fingers. One side of his head was bigger than the other, and he was always smiling. When he smiled his blue eyes shone.

"Who is yelling like that?" Jill asked, sitting down next to him. She liked Andrew, liked feeling the warm coming off his body. She sat a little closer.

"When the wind blows wrong you can hear it," Andrew said, placidly. "And you can smell it too! Whoo, it smells!"

Jill sniffed. It did smell. Jill couldn't say what it smelled like, except that the smell didn't make her nose happy like the smell of flowers, or the smell of lemons.

"What is it?" Jill asked.

"I don't know," Andrew said, tying a knot in a flexible stem. "Maybe it's animals. Strange animals."

Jill wrinkled her brow. She'd never met strange animals, only friendly animals, soft animals, kind animals. Could it be that there were things in this place she'd never met? But she thought she'd met everyone here. She'd been here so long. How long?

She looked around at all the other children playing tag in the sunshine. They all looked like her. They were all about the same size. All the children were smiling. She usually smiled too, but right now she didn't feel like it. She pursed her lips together like she was going to kiss someone, made a smacking sound.

"How many am I?" She asked Andrew.

Andrew thought hard about this for a moment, then he shrugged. "Maybe five," he said.

Jill thought about this. Five didn't seem very many. She'd been here as long as she could remember. She tried to count how many games of tag she'd played. It was a lot, maybe twenty, or three hundred. If she played a game of tag every day... but usually she played three games, or sometimes she played four. She shook her head, numbers buzzing around in it like the lazy bumblebees that drifted from flower to flower and never stung children, no matter what.

"Then how many are *you*?" She asked Andrew, hoping for an easier way out.

"Twenty-two," Andrew answered quickly, with pride in his voice. "I am twenty-two."

"Twenty-two is bigger than five, isn't it?" Jill asked.

"I guess." He smiled big, showing odd-shaped teeth like river pebbles. "I'm twenty-two!"

And he went back to tying daisies together, and when he was finished, he had a necklace and he hung it around Jill's neck.

There was no more screaming that day, but the next day the screaming came back, and Jill could not play hopscotch. There was too much screaming. So she went to where Andrew was sitting on the swing, twisting himself around and around, spinning and unspinning.

"Whooo!" Andrew giggled as the swing twisted and untwisted.

"I'm going to go and find the strange animals," Jill told him. "Goodbye."

"I want to come too!" Andrew said. He climbed off the swing and walked unsteadily beside her, his steps dizzy and unstraight. When he could walk straight again, he took her hand and whistled.

They walked through green fields and tall forests of trees that bloomed with yellow flowers. Friendly animals scampered across their path. A wise-looking raccoon brought them honey cakes wrapped in soft green leaves, carrying them in his neat little black paws.

"Or I have sweet sticky dates," said the raccoon, peering at them from behind his mask of black. "I can bring them to you if you want them."

"I like honey cakes," Jill said decisively.

"Me too," added Andrew.

When they got tired, they ate the honey cakes and drank from one of the silver fountains that were everywhere. The water was clear and cold, but if they wanted milk, they would find a milk fountain.

After a while, it got dark, and they snuggled next to each other. They didn't snuggle because they were scared, because there was nothing to be scared of, and they didn't snuggle because they were cold, because it was always warm and pleasant where they were. But it was nice to snuggle together and look up at the stars. Jill liked laying her head on Andrew's big soft belly.

"What are those?" Andrew asked her, pointing up at the stars. "How come they're up there?"

"I don't know," Jill said. "Maybe they're holes in the sky."

"Then what's showing through the holes?"

"The Heavenly Father," Jill said softly, knowing it was the answer but not knowing why.

"Oh, yes," Andrew said, nodding. "That's right."

Jill breathed in the dark perfumed air of night, felt Andrew's belly rising and falling with slow sleepy breath. Why did she know about The Heavenly Father, she wondered. No one had ever told her about The Heavenly Father, but she knew he was supposed to be kind. She wondered why she never saw him. The only ones she ever saw were children and Andrew.

"He must be very bright, bright as the sun," Andrew murmured. It sounded like he was dreaming.

"I guess," Jill said, snuggling up beside Andrew and closing her eyes.

They walked and walked, for a long time. They walked so far that there weren't as many trees, and there weren't as many silver fountains. And sometimes, the grass was brown instead of green, and sometimes, the trees had no leaves on them.

"Here are water bags you can use to carry water in," said the wise old raccoon, who had been following them. Jill's water bag was orange and Andrew's water bag was purple. The water bags were fun. Jill and Andrew filled them up and squirted water at each other. They filled them up a lot of times, and they both got very wet, and then dried off in the sun, and then played again. Andrew wanted to keep playing, but Jill heard the screaming again, so they filled up the water bags and resumed walking.

They walked and walked, for a long time. Sometimes the screaming would stop, and Jill thought they weren't walking the right way

THE SHORE WAS BURNED BLACK, AND THE LAKE WAS RINGED AROUND WITH BLACK TREES THAT LOOKED LIKE THE LINES CHILDREN MADE ON PAPER WITH BLACK CRAYONS.

But then it would start again, and they would start walking again following the distant sounds

They walked until they came to the Lake of Fire

The shore was burned black, and the lake was ringed around with black trees that looked like the lines the children made on paper with black crayons In the Lake of Fire there were grown-up people, as many as the stars in the sky, and they were screaming so loud, Andrew put his hands over his ears and closed his eyes

"I want to go back," he said to Jill. "I want to go back. Why are they screaming?"

Jill thought about it hard

"They are they are "

She didn't have the word for "pain." So she used the worst word she knew She whispered it in Andrew's ear

" alone "

There were many many people in the Lake of Fire, their arms stretched out. They grasped at her as she walked along the shore She bent down and looked closely at one of the grasping hands It was black and trembling Jill took it. It felt like hot paper, scratchy and rough She reached down lower, into the Lake of Fire, reaching for the person's arm. The Lake felt like warm caramel. She held her hand out to Andrew

"Help me pull!" she said.

Andrew helped her He pulled hard

"It's like tug-o-war," he said seriously, then he beamed, pulling harder. "Tug-o-war!"

Andrew helped her pull until the burned person came up onto the black shore. The person was wriggling and twisting like a child rolling down a hill, except there was no hill.

Jill put a hand on the person's forehead The person softened and stopped screaming

"Are you thirsty?" Jill asked The person did not answer, but Andrew gave his purple water bag to Jill, and Jill poured it into the person's mouth The person drank and drank, drinking down all the water in the purple water bag. Then the person fell asleep, breathing in and out like gentle wind in trees.

There was still screaming coming from the Lake of Fire, and many other hands But Jul was tired, and she wanted to sleep Andrew gathered her up, and they walked back to the nearest tree with green leaves, which was a long way back, and they slept

The next day, they woke up, and the burned person was sitting near them, not moving. His skin was still black, but it was not cracked and burned. It was black and shiny like a black shiny rock. His eyes were green as leaves. He was looking up at the tree.

"It is cool," he said softly, in a voice that sounded like he'd used it for too much screaming "Please let me stay here "

"You can stay here," Jill said

"I am glad," the burned man said. "It has been a long time since I was cool "

"How many are you?" Andrew asked him

"A hundred hundred hundred," the burned person said. His voice was very tired

"I am twenty two," Andrew said gravely "And Jill is five I think."

"We are all a hundred hundred hundred," the burned person said. "Unless we're older

"Why were you screaming"

"Because the fire hurt me

Jill looked at him quizzically She did not have the word "hurt." She rolled it around inside her head, from one ear to another

"Hurt," she said. Then crawled into the burned man s lap. She looked deep into his green eyes, scrutinizing what she saw there. She looked into his eyes for a long time, until she had the word, and then she blinked, terribly surprised and offended Outraged She pulled away from the burned man She didn't want to be close to him anymore She retreated to the safety of Andrew He put an arm around her and petted her hair

Hurt, she thought, wishing the word would go away She thought about all the other people burning in the Lake of Fire, and wanted to run and pull them out, all at once.

Andrew petted her hair, slow smooth movements

Then the raccoon came out from the forest and stopped in front of Andrew and Jill. In his little black hands he had a leaf-wrapped package

"I have sweet sticky dates," the raccoon said, laying the package in front of them. Andrew unwrapped the package, took three dates, chewed them with pleasurable smacking sounds

"Mmm," he said

Jill took a date too, and touched it to her tongue. It was very sweet. But instead of putting it into her mouth, she darted over to the burned man and put it between his lips. Then she hurried back to the safety of Andrew's arms, and didn't look at the burned man anymore.

Later, after they had slept, Jill and Andrew went back to the Lake of Fire and pulled out another burned man. They gave him water and dates, and he stopped screaming very quickly. They brought him to the cool place where the other burned man was sitting, and the two burned men sat side by side. They did not speak, but they did hold hands, and it seemed that they could talk that way, because they would sometimes nod to each other.

It became like a game, pulling burned people from the Lake of Fire and giving them a cold drink and setting them up in the little clearing beneath the trees. Andrew thought it was fun. Jill thought it was fun too, but not enough fun to make her laugh. It was fun like sleeping was fun, or sitting quietly looking at clouds.

After playing the game for a long time, Jill thought of an idea.

"How many can you count?" she asked Andrew.

"I can count to one hundred," Andrew said.

So they went to the clearing and counted. There were forty-three burned people sitting under the trees, hands clasped, smiling softly to each other.

"We bring a burned person every day," Jill said. "Every day is a burned person. That means we're forty-three old."

The next day, they pulled another burned person from the Lake of Fire.

"Today we are forty-four old, and tomorrow is another burned person, and we will be forty-five!" Jill said. This made her feel very proud, that she'd discovered this. It made her feel warm inside, like the warmth she felt when she put her arm in the Lake of Fire, but better even. Brighter.

"Tomorrow we will be forty-five!" she repeated, enjoying the magnitude of it.

"Hmm," said Andrew.

One night, the big round butter-colored moon was glowing down on them all softly. The moon made everything glow, and it made the shadows smooth and easy to recognize. Jill was not asleep, though. She was sitting, looking at all the burned people in the clearing. They all sat close together, swaying like saplings, hands clasped softly. They liked not being hurt. For them, just not being hurt was a game.

By why had they been hurt? she wondered. Why did they have the word for hurt, but no one had ever given it to her? She knew about The Heavenly Father, but no one had ever taught her. She wondered if they knew about hurt, but no one had ever taught them.

All the thinking made her head feel strange, like it was a balloon that was too full of water. Then she heard a little sound, a little scraping sound, and the raccoon came out from the forest and stood in front of her. In his little black hands he had a golden ball. He handed it to Jill. She took it.

It was smooth and gleaming, and when Jill looked into it she could see the reflection of the big round moon above, but there was also something else. Another place that she couldn't quite see.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You have discovered pain, and you have discovered time, and you have discovered memory. Knowing these things means that you aren't what you used to be. So you have to go to a different place now."

"A different place?"

"Yes."

Jill looked into the golden ball.

"There will be more there," the raccoon said. "There will be choices."

Jill wrinkled her brow. There was a feeling in her chest, like something leaping up. But that feeling was held down by something else, like a hand holding down a kitten that was trying to spring away.

"I don't want to go to a different place," Jill said finally.

"You don't belong in this place anymore."

"But I like it here. I like counting the burned people."

"Andrew will stay and count them," the raccoon said.

Jill felt something welling up in her heart, and remembered the word in the eyes of the first burned man. *Hurt.* And suddenly, she felt it. Felt it all across her skin like burning, all through her chest like the Lake of Fire.

"Andrew will not go with me?" She asked. "I will go alone?"

"Yes," said the raccoon.

"But I don't want to leave," she whispered. Tears rolled down her face. "I don't want to leave Andrew."

"You don't belong in this place anymore," the Raccoon said, again.

And she screamed for a moment, trying to force the sudden hurt out of her on a tide of sound, but only for a moment, because then she was gone.

After Jill was gone, the game of pulling people from the Lake of Fire wasn't much fun. So Andrew stopped going to the Lake. He stopped counting the burned people. Instead, he played a new game, a game the raccoon taught him. Every day the raccoon ran a distance and at the end of the distance, he dropped a present for Andrew. One day it was jacks, another day it was a bright blue shirt. Each day, Andrew got farther and farther away from the grove of burned people, until finally he came back to where all the children were, and it was like he had never left, and they all played games with him again and he went back to his swing and twisted and twisted, counting to fifty and then back down to zero, then to fifty and then back down to zero.

Before the raccoon went back into the forest, he gave Andrew a last present. It was a picture of Jill, drawn on a piece of paper.

"I will make her a daisy chain," Andrew said, looking hard at the features which he'd already begun to forget. "When I see her again."

And then he let the piece of paper go, and it blew away, over the green fields, up into the sky, behind the stars. ❧

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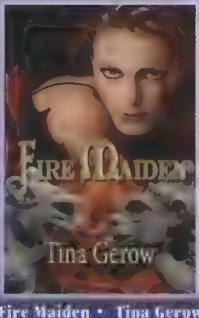

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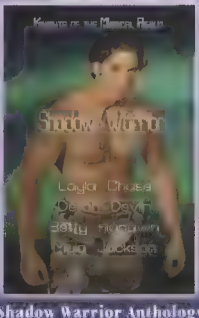


Shadow Warrior Anthology

The Time

Fantasy photographer
JOSEPH CORSENTINO
is in the process of
creating a microcosm
of faeries and
bringing a bit of magic
to all of our lives.

BY CHRISTINE COLBY

OF FAERIES

Artist Joseph Corsentino believes in faeries. [illegible] people were [illegible] those qualities. Faeries for me were the ravers I knew growing up for the kooks who constantly got me out of bed to do something more interesting … I see less and less of that as time goes on. Now is the time to reinvigorate that, that there is magic in everybody if they can just learn to enjoy it." In fact, the whole mythos and look he's created (viewable on his gallery-intensive website, *www.timeofthefaeries.com*) can be traced back to one of these denizens of the alternative nightlife world. When asked what was the first fairy photograph he shot, he answers, "A raver girl with a pair of wings who had all the jewelry of that species of modern hippies … if faeries were alive today, they'd be ravers. They'd have all the lights and the cute little pieces of jewelry. I saw her and was like, 'You are a faerie!' [illegible] modern world."

At the moment, [illegible] Corsentino favors three recurring [illegible] Elementals, Street Fees, Twilight, and the newest, the Shadine. None of these have much in common with the cloyingly sweet traditional representations of faeries. These faeries aren't just about flitting through the air on their gossamer wings, leaving a trail of sparkly dust behind them like Tinkerbelle. Some of them look haunted and mysterious, some are gothic seductresses, and others involve [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

LEFT TO RIGHT: Fiery, species' Faerie, whose origin was the Faerie War, is located in the Deserts of Mirrus. Many of the [illegible] ...ness. ...ness. Operates in 21st-century Los Angeles. Street Faerie As... inhabits the dark corners of ...E.

Within the seven classifications, his creatures have more specific attributes, such as Emily Halyon, who is described as

Species: Nephilim
Era: 20th-Century America
Origin: Heaven
Current Location: Chicago

And Rayne, who is

Species: Faerie/Greystar Vampire
Time Period: Post Fairy War
Origin: Royale Court of Queen Eri
Current Location: Los Angeles

Corsentino teases his public with these descriptions. Why are some faeries located in certain cities? When was the war? Who is the Queen? When asked about his mythos and these mentions of events and characters not entirely explained on the website, he says, "The faery war was the catalyst for why the magic went away ... you need a horrible misunderstanding to make the magic leave the faenes and the faenes to then leave us alone. So the magic left, it went bye-bye, and when the fairies came back they had no place to live, as if you had come home and your home is burned to the ground ... they have no place to go; they're homeless, and humans aren't ready to accept them."

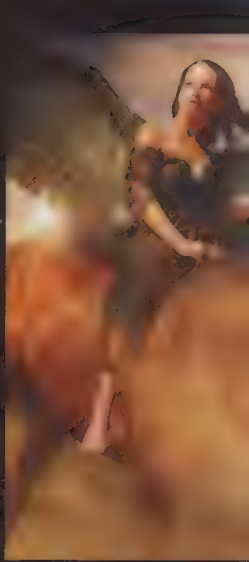
Corsentino's universe started to firm after a series of photo shoots, and now he needs a three page panoramic outline to keep up with his characters and events. When asked if his upcoming book will explain his world he answers, "The book that's coming out in October is a teaser book to get you started into the universe, and I plan on it being, eventually, an anthology. You can read them separately. There are plans to do 'music inspired by' and a trading-card set, either a customizable game or perhaps just trading cards. We're still experimenting with the characters. There are six new species to be added to the roster. The stories can always be told. It can be very much a role-playing game universe. Outside of the characters I create, you

can add to the universe as long as it fits within its rules. I set up a series of other characters and elements that I'll be experimenting with in 2007, some technology inspired scenes and some more vampires on the road to redemption.

Perhaps it's not surprising given the fullness of his faery world that in addition to the maybe expected citing of Brian Froud, Corsentino is also a big fan of Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* and of JMS's J. Michael Straczynski's *Babylon 5*. The similarities between those two are that they both wrote out a large scale universe first and then put pen to paper to create a story. I'm also inspired by the tenacity of Joss Whedon and the art of Luis Royo. I wanted to shoot the kind of stuff that he painted." He has, indeed, achieved a similar sort of fantasy realism as his idol Royo, only through digital technology instead of paint and canvas. His art isn't just photography, it isn't just digital art—he calls it "fantasy art and fairy photography."

Corsentino is very clear that just because a lot of his art is digitally manipulated, that it is not artificial or faked. "I shoot digital and I construct it with Photoshop, but I don't construct it within the computer. Everything you see is digitally shot … the wings are photographed from birds and dragonfly wings. They are shot on a black background, and then I compose them onto the faery seamlessly. The photos are composed with layers, very similar to what people can do in the darkroom. The background, the clouds, even the smoke is all created from elements, the twinks of light are actually fireworks that I shot. You shoot enough Fourth of Julys, you get enough fireworks," he says. "You have a little ball of faery light zooming around, well that's because someone went to Tijuana and got an illegal firework, and I was there to shoot it."

On the topic of faery realness, the 1917 Cottingley photographs come up in conversation. These alleged photos of authentic faeries were denounced as obvious hoaxes by some, but convinced none other than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle of their veracity. When asked to weigh in on the contentious topic, Corsentino responds, "There are people who are really going to get upset at what I'm about to say. Those pictures were fakes. What those faeries represent is what has been not real about faeries. I think that real faeries and real magic are invisible and basically exist if you believe in them enough, if you



work at them enough based on choices and inspiration. In that case, I think the Cottingley pictures are a real nice attempt to create a revitalization of belief and to create a little magic that way, so in that way it was a success."

One challenge Corsentino faces is conveying the stories of his universe. Unlike making a movie, "In one picture or series of pictures you have to tell or hint at a story while still being aesthetically pleasing, like showing only one frame of a film," he says. On top of that difficulty, some of the faeries themselves are more difficult to represent in that one frame. Several of his creations picture creatures without wings. One wonders, what can be done to convey the faery-ness of a being lacking wings? Corsentino's answer again refers to his dense mythos. "Models without wings present a huge challenge. We're starting to play with that. The new part of the story is that some of the faeries who were able to get off the streets, out of the gutters, learned how to blend in with society ... kind of shed their wings. The wings are invisible, we can't see them, so we're trying to create a wingless faery ... with the colors, the setting, so people who know the universe can tell she's a faery. They're modern faeries. They're the people you meet at 4 AM at a bus stop or a bar ... who cause a chain reaction in your life. You may only interact with them for 20 minutes, but it will affect something in your life. For all the people I've met who have done that to me, I dedicated that species to them."

Corsentino wants to make it clear that despite his name being featured prominently

LEFT TO RIGHT: ... and accessories evoke a 21st-century faerie; Tarmus Visa, the Avatar of Nature, is an ... from Heaven who lives on Earth ... at Grove ... Twilight Faerie ... Malachi (left) is a Street ... of the Fae Side ... species who lives on the streets of LA; ... ASSET: Ashtra ... Seelie ... came in on the Twilight ... in ... 21st-century Los Angeles.

in the title. It's not a loving endeavor from just me. This stuff would not be created without the seamstress stylings and design of my fiancée, Donny Ha, and without the makeup of Andrea Dow. She is definately now our main makeup artist and has done so much to create the look of the faeries. She takes my direction, but it's a lot of her ideas and application that make it sparkle so much. Donny and I work really hard to make the outfits when we can't find something in the store. She has to make it from scratch. I have a good team, and this has definitely become a project of passion among the three of us.

This type of intensive effort from his team is a far cry from his first rave girl. When he first began creating his images, he "had a camera and some friends who were willing to play dress-up, but I had no freakin' clue what I was doing." Now, his art is more about the creation and the process—things made with heart and passion," he says. He sounds a little wistful as he says. "Each image takes a while. People need to remember what creating art and pursuing their passions is about—changing things one person at a time with muse and inspiration. I think that our current world is very anti art for passion and more into advertising and art for money. When I was growing up, I had very few supporters who said go out and do what you want to do, go out and feel passion and create your own art. I had a lot of people telling me not to do things creatively. I feel like one of the last soldiers in the battlefield ... there isn't a big support network for people who do have these big dreams.

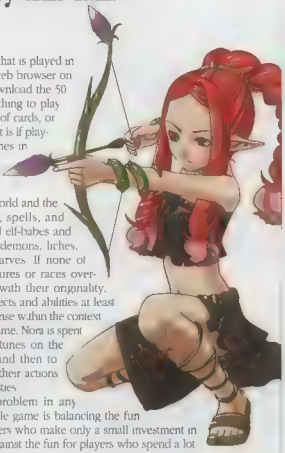
Now, Corsentino participates in a support network for others. "I am part of a group of faery photographers [interestingly, called The Cottingley Society] at *www.faerechronicles.com*. There is Margaret Dean from Australia, Tracy Cornett from Florida, Dave Windham from Utah, and a lot of others who have put together a forum for faery and fantasy photographers only. Fantasy photography is relatively new, and is slowly gaining acceptance. A lot of us have banded together under the tutelage of Margaret Dean. There's a forum on the website where we rant and rave and we show our work. We all work together on promoting fantasy photography as a legitimate form of art." A glance at the works shown on these pages should leave no doubt that the art is legitimate. Whether faeries themselves are real, or not ... well, that's your own decision.

By Eric T. Baker

Six new games—with and without elf-babes—are in play this fall.

Pox Nora is an online collectible card game that is played in a Java environment that launches out of a web browser on either a PC or a Mac. It costs nothing to download the 50 megs worth of environment and it costs nothing to play the game once it has launched. The starter deck of cards, or runes as they are called, is also free. The only cost is if players decide they want other runes besides the ones in their starter deck. "Packs" of 30 runes are $8.50 and boosters of 10 are $3.00.

The name of the game comes from its location, Pox, and its magic, Nora. Pox is a fantasy world and the Runes depict a variety of magical creatures, spells, and equipment. Yes, there are pictures of half-naked elf-babes and horned demons, liches, and dwarves. If none of the pictures or races overwhelm with their originality, their effects and abilities at least make sense within the context of the game. Nora is spent to put Runes on the board, and then to change their actions and abilities.



The problem in any collectible game is balancing the fun for players who make only a small investment in cards against the fun for players who spend a lot on cards. *PN* does this by having common runes counter the effects of rare runes. Similarly, one of the advantages of playing the game often is that runes earn experience with each battle, which the player can then spend to make them more powerful. This is balanced by the fact that player must spend more Nora to play more powerful runes. For people who enjoy the pace and challenge of collectible games, *PN* is a good option because of its lack of entry cost and because there is always someone online to play with.

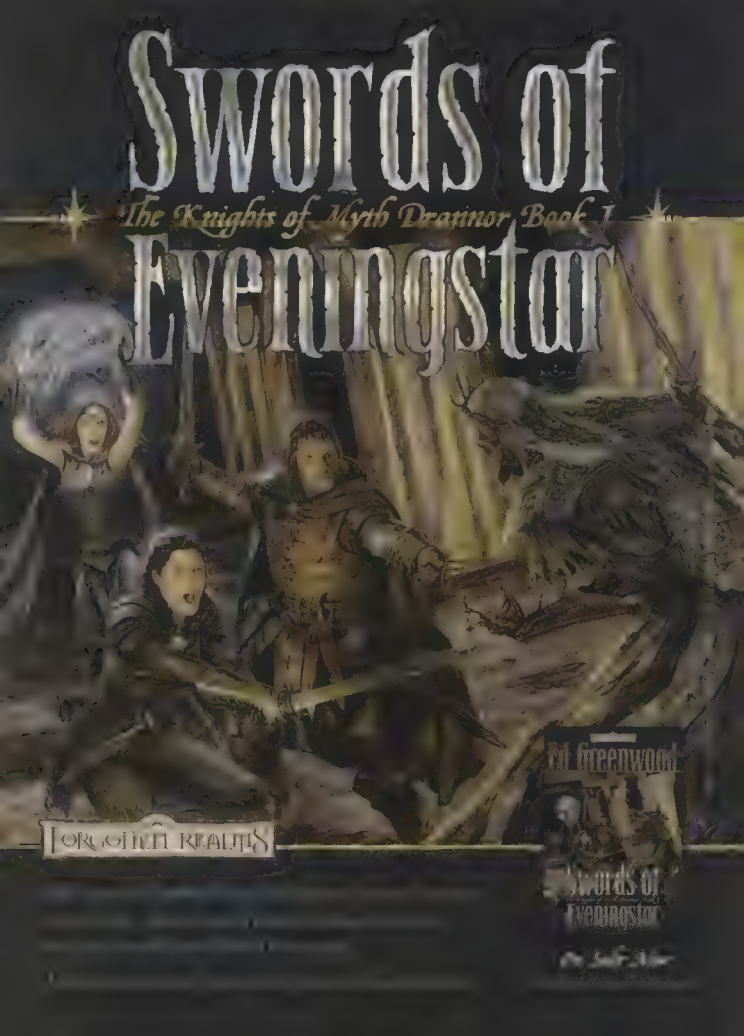
Pox Nora *is an online collectible card game from Octopi Inc.*
TOP: A character from Blade Dancer: Lineage of Light *from NIS America.*

Another game with elf-babes, horned demons, undead, and dwarves is ***Dungeon Siege II: Broken World*** for the PC from Gas Powered Games. *BW* is an expansion of last year's *DSII*, a big, quest-filled, hack-and-slash RPG. In *DSII* the player leads a party of fighters and wizards on an epic quest across many maps and dungeons to restore balance to the world. At the end of *DSII*, the player succeeds, but at a terrible cost. The opening of *BW* finds the player's character in an outpost of survivors, many of whom aren't very happy at the shape the character's heroics have left the world in. At this outpost, the player can reassemble his or her party from *DSII* and begin further adventures.

Although *BW* is an expansion of *DSII*, it comes

Swords of Eveningstar

The Knights of Myth Drannor, Book I



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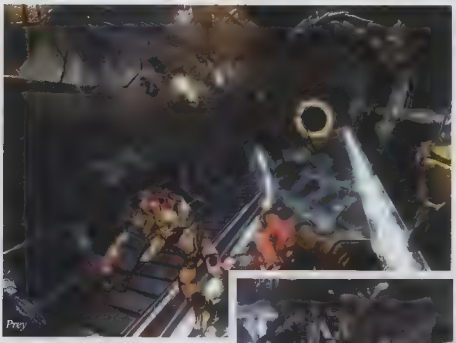


Prey

with six prerolled, 39th-level characters so that if the players have lost their save games from *DSII*, they can still play *BW* without having to play through the whole origina. game again. Of course, players who do import their saved characters to the expansion will be at an advantage in power and items compared to the prerolled characters. For players who are starting with new copies of both the game and the expansion, or want to replay the original game, there is the option to start *DSII* from the beginning, but this time using additional race and character classes included in *BW* from the start.

Of the changes, the new classes make the most difference. They are both hybrids, mixing magic and mayhem. The oddly named Fist of Stone class mixes good melee abilities with magical healing in a way that is unique among player classes. The more traditionally named Blood Assassins combine poisoning magic with good-ranged skills. Blood Assassins are dangerous, but they need melee characters in the party to give them separation for their attack. Fists of Stone, in contrast, are pretty self-sufficient. With more quests and more dungeons and new monsters *BW* keeps the *DSII* experience going without making any big changes in it. Players that liked *DSII* enough to finish it will enjoy playing out *BW*.

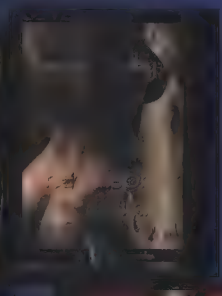
A game that does not contain elf babes, but might have benefited from them, is ***Prey***, a first-person shooting game from Human Head Studios for the Xbox 360 and the PC. Set in the modern day, players take the role of a young Cherokee Indian named Tommy who wants to take his girlfriend, Jen, away from the bar she owns and off the reservation where they live. Tommy gets his wish, in a way, when aliens attack the earth and Tommy's grand father are sucked into one of the alien ships.

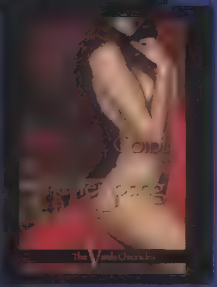
The majority of the game takes place aboard the alien ships and bases, and once the game moves to these settings, it pretty much abandons story in favor of horror. Fans of science fiction horror movies like *Pitch Black* and *Aliens* are going to like *Prey* because it shares the bloodiness and hopelessness of that genre. When the players aren't seeing other humans crushed into mush, they're encountering them as brain-dead

Blade Dancer

A powerful new voice in Paranormal...

Tessa E. Colby





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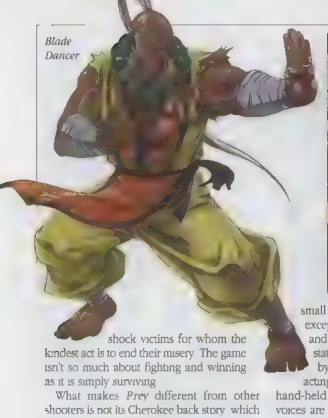
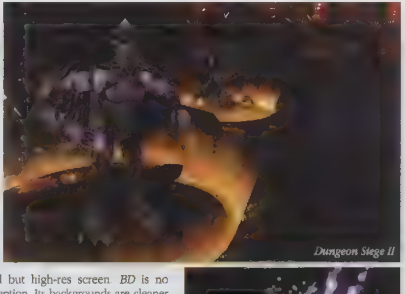
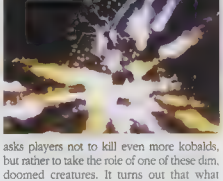


Blade Dancer



Dungeon Siege II



shock victims for whom the kindest act is to end their misery. The game isn't so much about fighting and winning as it is simply surviving.

What makes *Prey* different from other shooters is not its Cherokee back story which really isn't that notable, but the way it plays with gravity. The aliens have a lot of walkways with their own gravity so that again and again in the game the players find themselves back in a previously seen room except this time they are on the ceiling or the wall. Lots of puzzles and encounters in the game turn on the direction the gravity is going, where the character is standing, and where they want to go. For players who like fighting in close spaces, who don't mind shooting "alien" weapons, and who enjoy a horror setting, then *Prey* will keep them very entertained.

The Elderon Secret of Xen'drik

A game that probably would have had elf-babes in it if it had been created in America instead of Japan is ***Blade Dancer: Lineage of Light***, a real-time RPG for the PSP from NIS America. True to its origins, however, *BD* does contain winsome anime girls, spikey-haired anime guys, and a tremendous number of monsters for them to battle. Other than the art, the big difference between *BD* and *BW* is that in the American game, all movement and combat happen at the same time rate on the same map. In *BD*, the player's characters travel on one map, fight on a second, and interact with NPCs on a third.

Given the compactness of the PSP, it is always surprising how good games look on its small but high-res screen. *BD* is no exception. Its backgrounds are cleaner and its characters more blocky than in state-of-the-art console games, but not by much. There is also a lot of voice acting in the game, another bonus in a hand-held game. Not that the graphics or voices are used to tell a particularly original story. The world is in trouble, the teen boy hero is the answer, and it takes him all game to realize it.

The best part of the game is its crafting. Everything the players' characters use degrades and none of it can be repaired, so players have an incentive to constantly combine elements to create new gear. Templates for items can be purchased in the towns, or the player can just experiment with what is in the character's inventory. Parts can be bought as well, but the most powerful and useful parts are all found at monster drops. *BD* is a good game for fans of Japanese RPGs, or for people with a PSP who want to give RPGs a try.

A game that can have elf-babes but doesn't in its basic form is ***Kobalds Ate My Baby!***, a paper and dice, beer and pretzels RPG from Ninth Level and Dork Storm. Kobalds, for those who haven't played *Dungeons & Dragons* in a few years, are famous for being the vicious half-hit dice monsters that Level 1 characters beat up on their way to a higher level and more interesting challenges. *KAMB!* asks players not to kill even more kobalds, but rather to take the role of one of these dim, doomed creatures. It turns out that what kobalds like to do is eat, and what they like to eat most is human babies. So the challenge to the players is, can they get enough to eat for themselves?

The Elderon Secret of Xen'drik

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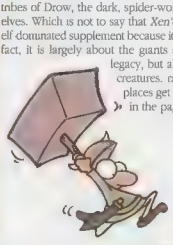
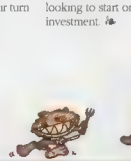
and their king before they die—horribly.

Just for the record, yes this is all quite funny. Gaming groups that aren't laughing as they play the adventures of their determined, yet hopeless characters either don't have the right idea or aren't drinking enough beer. Or both. Take for example, the King Torg optional rule. All kobald caves everywhere are ruled by a king named Torg. Whenever the king's name is spoken in play, all players are required to yell "All Hail King Torg!" or else make an immediate horrible death check. Players who blow the horrible death check roll (which comes up lots of different ways during the game) must then roll on the (extensive) Horrible Death table at the back of the book and apply the results. Usually this mean rolling up a new kobald, but since character creation is quick and easy and victory points transfer to the new character, dying is relatively painless—for the player.

In format *KAMB!* is just like more traditional, more serious RPGs, but there are some differences. For one thing, there is an actual winner in a *KAMB!* game as players are rewarded with victory points they can spend on bonuses, gear, or better skills. Victory points are awarded for "killing things, cooking things, bringing babies back to the caves making the Mayor [Game Master] laugh so hard he pees himself," or fulfilling victory conditions set out at the beginning of the game. A very funny read, mechanically sound for its genre, and much fun to play, *KAMB!* is a good game for any group that wants a break from seriousness.

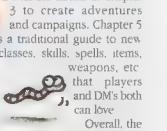
Finally, ***Eberron: Secret of Xen'drik*** is a 158-page hardcover supplement from Wizards of the Coast for their Eberron *D&D* campaign. It's first elf-babe is pictured on page 6, and she isn't the last since Xen'drik, while once the domain of a high giant culture, has become an uncharted wilderness that is the home of many, many tribes of Drow, the dark, spider-worshipping elves. Which is not to say that *Xen'drik* is an elf-dominated supplement because it is not. In fact, it is largely about the giants and their legacy, but all sorts of creatures, races, and places get their turn in the pages.





Kobalds Ate My Baby!

E:SoX is an interesting experiment. One of the truths of game publishing is that while all groups like to have adventure scenarios to (at a minimum) get a feel for how a game runs, adventure modules don't sell very well compared to "gear and background" supplements, which lack specific plots and maps, but are long on ideas and loot. *E:SoX* is a hybrid of these two kinds of supplements. Chapter 1 gives a description of the region and an overview of its highlights. Chapter 2 gives descriptions and maps of interesting places that DMs can put into a campaign as they are needed. Chapter 3 gives lists, descriptions, and stats for the various exceptional people and monsters that inhabit Xen'drik. Chapter 4 lays out how to mix and match and string together the places of Chapter 2 with the threats of Chapter 3 to create adventures and campaigns. Chapter 5 is a traditional guide to new classes, skills, spells, items, weapons, etc that players and DM's both can love.



Overall, the form of *E:SoX* works very well. The cafeteria style of the supplement strikes a nice balance between the "open it and go" quickness of a dedicated adventure and the "prepare for days" personalization of a DM's custom adventure. Plus, there is enough crunchy stuff for players who aren't going to run adventures out of the book. And the setting itself is a good one, with an emphasis on exploration that fits with Eberron's place as the "swashbuckling" brand of *D&D*. For DMs or players in an Eberron campaign, or for those looking to start one, this is a book worth the investment.

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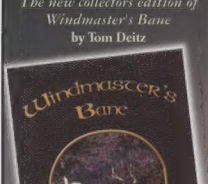

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folkroots

Continued from page 30

basic level, are so often all about."

In contemporary fiction, a number of writers have drawn from death folklore and folk tales, creating stories and characters that are both memorable and thought-provoking.

The Farthest Shore, the third book in Ursula K. Le Guin's "Earthsea" series, is an extraordinary meditation on death and how we confront it in our lives and ourselves. She draws on many folklore motifs—particularly those folk tales that speculate what might happen if Death was banished from the world and no creature died. A female Death is a striking figure in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series of graphic novels, and in Peter Beagle's now-classic story "Come Lady Death." The Godfather/Godmother Death fairy tale has been retold in a variety of ways, in Rachel Pollack's novel *Godmother Night* (depicting death as an elderly woman escorted by five red-haired, leather-clad, motorcycle-riding female attendants), Jane Yolen's wry story "Godmother Death," and a sprightly version by Roger Zelazny, "Godson" (with a football-loving Death who's not above helping his favorite teams). Tanith Lee's dark novel *White As Snow* pairs the Snow White fairy tale with the myth of Hades and Persephone, exploring the theme of the life-death cycle from a number of mythological perspectives.

"The Shape of Things," a short story by Ellen Steiber, draws on a shamanic Guatemalan folk tale involving the creatures who mediate between Death and the mortal realm. "Mister Death and the Red-Headed Woman" by Helen Eustis is an absolutely delightful tale about a woman who bargains for the life of her intended—only to find that Death himself is the better man of the two. *Hannah's Garden* by Midori Snyder is a contemporary fantasy novel about a young woman (a Celtic musician), her grandfather (a famous artist), and her long-deceased grandmother (creator of a magical garden). It's a story rooted in death lore, faery lore, and the enchantment of the natural world. "Jack Straw," by the same author, is a powerful little tale, in the bargaining-with-death tradition, about a girl who riddles Death to keep her life a little longer.

"When I wrote 'Jack Straw,' " Snyder says, "I remember thinking about how hard it was to fit into one image the complexity of my feelings about death. Death, when not associated with those otherwise violent sorts of death-dealers, is very ambiguous. At some point we must accept and embrace it, because it is the fate of us all—yet we resist it (at least at certain times in our lives) because of its finality. And we re-create it in folk tale figures who allow us to personalize our contact with death long enough to confront it, to argue with it, to pit our wits against it.... and perhaps, if we are lucky, to finally make peace with it."

interview

Continued from page 46

reading this, I'm thinking, what a wuss! I mean, I'm sorry, it's hard work, but the rest of the life and the house doesn't stop because you're writing.

PW: Can aspiring writers learn from your blog?

LH: Maybe some things. But the two most important things to a writer are the two things hardest to teach. One, I can't teach you how to have your own voice. Only you can find that. And two, I can't tell you how to come up with interesting and different ideas that are like nobody else's. Those are the two things that will overcome everything else. If you have your own unique voice and if your ideas are unique, publishers will forgive you grammar. They'll forgive that they have to edit you. Because you can learn to get better at grammar. You can learn to get better at editing yourself. You can learn to get better at all these things that are nuts and bolts. But the other stuff, no.

PW: Isn't that related to what you were saying about the subconscious being closer to the surface in writers and other creative people?

LH: Yes, absolutely.

PW: When is the next book in the Mereditth Gentry series coming out?

LH: In December. It's called *Mistral's Kiss*.

PW: Do you switch back and forth between the two series?

LH: I generally do try to trade back and forth. But this past year was a very odd year. It was a year when some ideas came on so strong that everything else just had to move out of their way. I was in the middle of writing *Danse Macabre* when the Micah idea came and knocked so loudly on my subconscious that I had to for the first time stop an actual Anita book to write a different Anita book, which I'd never had happen before with any other book.

PW: A lot of writers would be feeling burned out at this point, but it sounds like you're just hitting your stride.

LH: Yeah. If you look at most people who do series work, around Book 5 to Book 8, they are either bored or tired of their series. Me, that's about where I settle in. When I write a Merry book and go away for a few months, then come back to Anita, it's like old home week. It's like I missed them, literally, the way you miss good friends. You sit down to dinner and go, well, what have you been doing? So yeah, a lot of writers do seem to get burned out or whatever. But I keep learning new things about my characters. I love them more and more. In *Danse Macabre*, I learned things about my world that I did not know. I learned things about people and their interactions that were brand new to me and amazing. It's very much like real life. You think you know somebody, you've been good friends with them for a decade, and then suddenly they turn around and surprise you.

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